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THE SHATTERED HARP

THE SHATTERED HARP

A Romance on the life of Lord Byron

BY

HOWARD GORDON PAGE

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LINES TO LADY BYRON.

I have had many foes but none like thee,
For 'gainst the rest, myself I could defend
And be avenged or turn them into friend.
But thou, in safe implacability
Hadst nought to dread. . . .
And thus, upon the world—trust in thy truth
And the wild fame of my ungoverned youth,
On things that were not and on things that are,
Even upon such a basis hast thou built
A monument, whose cement hath been guilt,
The Moral Clytemnestra of Thy Lord
And hewed down with an unsuspected sword
Fame, peace and hope—and all the better life
Which, but for this cold treason of the heart
Might still have risen from out the grave of strife
And found a nobler duty than to part.
But of thy virtues didst thou make a vice
Trafficking with them in a purpose cold,
For present anger and for future gold.
And thus once entered into crooked ways
The early truth which was thy proper praise
Did not still walk beside thee, but at times
And with a breast unknowing its own crimes,
Deceit, averments incompatible,
Equivocations, and the thoughts that dwell
In Janus spirits. The significant eye
Which learns to lie with silence:
All found a place in thy philosophy.
The means were worthy and the end is won,
I would not do by thee as thou hast done.

Byron.

PROLOGUE

It was in the fifth year of King George the Third's reign, on a cold January night in 1765, that this story begins.

The scene in which it opens is an hotel in Pall Mall, where a party of gentlemen had dined together and sat late over wine and an exchange of wit.

In the dining-room, bright with firelight and candles, noisy with laughter, the guests were enjoying themselves to their hearts' content, regardless of snow and a keen east wind outside. There was a lull in the conversation when two of their members were missed. Whilst the others were wondering when and why they had disappeared, let us leave the warmth and light and seek them.

They were not far away, only in a room above that was empty of all furniture save a table with a solitary candlestick. The light from its candle emitted a feeble glimmer on the polished wood.

Flushed with wine and maddened with fury, William, Lord Byron, the fifth and worst of his race, confronted his cousin, Mr. William Chaworth, whose usually kind face was set and stern.

The two heard the laughing and clinking of glasses in the room beneath them. Then someone called out for a song. Without, the snow gently drifted down, soft and white as if in silent reproach to the fierce anger of these two men within.

William Chaworth spoke.

"Lord Byron, it is useless to prolong this interview. I will not fight you to-night, but my seconds shall wait on you in the morning unless you retract your words."

William Byron laughed insolently.

"What I have said, I repeat," he sneered, "that strumpet, Jenny."

"Be silent, sir," cried Chaworth.

"Jenny McNeal is a slut, anybody's woman," shouted Byron. "Why half the town, including myself, had her before you picked her up." He snapped his fingers derisively

in the other's face and then reeled against the table for support. Chaworth looked at him for a second before he answered.

"You're too drunk to-night to realize what you are saying. Go home man and sleep yourself sober, then repeat those words to me to-morrow, if you dare."

He moved towards the door as if to terminate the interview.

"Fight, you cur." The sound of steel caused Chaworth to turn quickly. Byron had drawn his sword and was moving towards him. "Blast you, what are you waiting for?" The words were hissed out, and in another instant the drunken man almost threw himself forward and lurched an instant back again, then rushed towards Chaworth just as the latter had drawn his own weapon and thrust at him with his sword.

Unwilling to attack a drunken man, Chaworth parried as well as he was able, but Byron lunged at him like a demon, shouting out obscene oaths all the time.

"Byron, you are mad, desist," cried Chaworth, and turned to grasp the bell and rouse the house.

"That settled our score," shouted Byron, and darting forward as Chaworth turned again to defend himself, raised his sword and with an obscene oath had run him through the breast.

William Chaworth stood perfectly still for a second, his sword dropped from his grasp, his eyes distended with one agonized look at his opponent, then with a quick gasping cry, he fell against the table and then prone on to the floor.

The room was plunged in darkness. Byron could hear the candle rolling away. He found himself swaying to and fro. He cursed his victim for having extinguished the light and groped for the door.

"Water, for God's sake, water," moaned the dying man.

"To hell with you, let me get out of this," was the callous reply. But though Byron redoubled his efforts to find his way to the entrance, he only succeeded in coming into contact with the panelled wall. He hammered against it. Then leaned back exhausted and peered into the direction where Chaworth lay. A terrible silence ensued.

"Good God," muttered the former, "is he dead already?"

A cold sweat broke over him. Was he alone with a corpse? He remembered now that when Chaworth and he had entered, he had requested the waiter to lock them in, saying he would

ring when he wished to leave. Where was the bell rope? He was shivering with fright.

" Lights ! bring light, I say." His voice rose to a scream of terror. He could hear the singing and laughter from below. The chorus of some well-known song drowned his cries for help.

" Lights ! you cursed fools," he shrieked, and threw himself down on the floor, and hammered it with his fists with all his might.

The singing ended abruptly.

There was a confused babel of sounds. Then steps on the stairs. Soon the door was unlocked and flung open and in rushed the landlord followed by two servants carrying torches. The guests had also rushed upstairs and crowded in at the door.

Byron staggered to his feet with one idea, " to get away." But he found his path blocked. The lights dazed him, and he stood there swaying to and fro in confusion.

By common consent, the gentlemen had closed round the entrance. One of them, George Selwyn, by name, thrust him back.

" Don't let him go, any of you," he called to the others.

Then he crossed to the stricken William Chaworth, and knelt beside him, assisting the landlord to staunch the blood that was fast staining the white silk waistcoat.

Byron watched them stupidly. He saw one thing only. The patch of red growing larger and larger. It blotted out everything. The room had vanished. The people with it. But that growing circle of blood became imprinted on his brain.

Meanwhile Chaworth opened his eyes and looked up at Selwyn.

" It's a lie, a lie," he whispered feebly.

Selwyn raised his head and held some water to his lips.

" Hush, don't try to speak just yet."

The landlord bathed the damp forehead with a handkerchief and looked up at Selwyn.

" He's a going, sir."

The other glanced up with abhorrence at William Byron.

" Lift me up quickly."

The dying man gripped the lawn at his throat and almost tore it away in his efforts to breathe.

" Byron . . . you lied. . . . She was as pure as . . . day.

My . . . God ! air ! I say. . . . The curse . . . of this . . . on you and your . . . race . . . for ever."

The words were gasped out with a last convulsive effort. Chaworth's voice died away with a horrible rattle and he fell back. Dead.

A breathless hush ensued.

George Selwyn covered the poor staring eyes, his own blurred with tears. He laid the lifeless body reverently down and bent over it, shaking with the emotion he vainly tried to suppress.

A murmur of sympathy ran through the room. No one spoke.

He rose abruptly, went over and picked up William Byron's sword ; it was still wet with Chaworth's blood. With a cry of anger he held it up for all to see, then broke it in two and flung the pieces at its owner's feet.

" This was no fair fight. It was murder. By heaven, Byron, you shall answer for this with your life," he cried furiously.

The accused man made no reply. He turned to the door. All fell away from him in disgust and loathing. He passed slowly out and descended the stairs, alone ; the front doors were open, and he found himself out in the street, and wandered on, dazed, with the snow falling. But he saw nothing of its whiteness around, beneath or above.

He saw only that great patch of blood growing larger and larger. After many hours of walking in the cold night, he made his way to his rooms still alone. In the years to come, this was to be his doom. . . . It slowly maddened him.

Small wonder William Byron grew to wander about the grounds of his ancestral home at Newstead Abbey as though he was haunted. Shunned by his associates, dreaded by the servants, feared by the neighbours, who used to declare that " the wicked Lord " had sold himself to the devil.

He had faced his trial for manslaughter. George Selwyn saw to it that he was tried for the death of William Chaworth. But in the absence of any definite evidence and the fact that both swords had been drawn, also the lack of witnesses, he was acquitted.

From that hour, he became a social pariah. A great darkness closed in on his brain. He sank lower and lower into brutish pleasures. One night he awoke to find himself held down in his bed by his servants. The first of many

attacks of madness that were henceforth to be his fate. Just before the end, his reason returned to him.

" The Curse," he cried in terror. " The curse of Chaworth. Will it ever be lifted ? "

The shivering menials who tended him remembered these words. They were handed down from one member of the race to another. They became a prophecy at Annesley Hall, the home of his victim.

" The Curse of Annesley Hall."

When would it pass away ? Not with his death.

And after ?

Many tears must be shed and many hearts broken ere William Chaworth's dying words reached their fulfilment, but of the end of that curse no man could prophesy.

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THE SHATTERED HARP

CHAPTER ONE

THE world of London fashion in 1812, some forty-seven years after the events recorded in the preceding chapter, was a strange medley of beauty, brutality and wit. Intellectual power went hand in hand with folly and depravity.

In France, Equality, Fraternity and Liberty had been first established with the gentle aid of wholesale massacre. In England, always a follower of French fashions, they adopted a democratic plainness of dress and a coarseness of life to evince their approval of the Republican victors. This, while extending a liberal hospitality to the aristocratic refugees, seemed the surest way of remaining on good terms with all parties concerned.

The Prince Regent, an intimate friend of the infamous Duke of Orleans, received the news that His Grace had betrayed his own brother, Louis the Sixteenth of France, to the guillotine. The event, which stunned Europe, had a remarkable effect on this promising young Heir Apparent.

Anxious to convince his future subjects that HIS royal blood would not be worth their shedding, even if they felt so inclined, he plunged into a fresh vortex of sensual pleasures with greater relish than before, setting such a brilliant example to his own immediate set that the younger men of the day were corrupted by his example almost beyond hope of redemption.

No gentleman of fashion could now hope to gain admission to Carlton House until he had fully graduated in the noble pastimes of gambling, drinking and drabbing.

The gentler sex, or a very large proportion of them, were not far behind in the first two recreations. Secret drug taking and open infidelity to their spouses by the married ones were quite the hall-mark of social standing.

There were, however, some very notable exceptions who did

their best to uphold the traditional dignity of political society. And these hostesses made their salons the centre of attraction for statesmen, writers or other intellectuals. But the tide was too strong for the majority. How could it be otherwise when the Prince of Wales held Court in London and Brighton for his mistresses and drinking orgies? His unhappy consort wept in secret. Many pitied her. No one dared to befriend her. The future Queen of England was unbefriended by all who desired to bask in Royal favour.

At times, a brilliant meteor flashed across the social horizon. Hero-worship, a wholesome virtue if cultivated in reason and a dangerous one in excess, especially to the unfortunate "Hero," flourished like the proverbial bay tree. It supplied a new excitement to the jaded members of the "exclusive set."

The reign of Beau Brummel was now drawing to its close. He had risen like a star in the night; taught Society how to dress with an elegant simplicity. One of his most successful pupils had been the Prince Regent. He made him dress like a man of taste instead of a mountebank. Having learnt all that the poor Beau could teach him, and nearly ruined him in the process, he now discarded him as a mark of gratitude. Brummel revenged himself by holding courts of his own. But his days were numbered and the spectre of poverty was tapping him on his elegant shoulder.

It was rumoured that his gambling debts were fast becoming a very dangerous embarrassment to him; that before long he would be holding receptions inside a debtor's prison. Society, therefore, ceased to interest itself in him to any great extent. The men still wore the famous stock collar he had brought to such perfection, but this was not in memory of Brummel. It was simply because they had never had such a style before. It gave them supreme distinction in appearance. The higher the stock, the more unapproachable they became to the common herd.

But, a new star had now appeared; one who had outshone the luckless Dandy and reflected more glory on Society with a capital S.

A great poet had dawned on the horizon.

This might not have caused any special excitement but for one fact. He happened to be a PEER. Such an ornament to Literature from one of high rank created a tremendous impression.

The publication of a poem of astounding merit had awakened

the Aristocracy to the surprising fact that some of them still possessed brains. Someone read the work, then he or she passed it on to quite a number of their friends, who also read it and passed it on to their friends, and to make a long story short, Lord Byron's work, "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," became the sole topic of conversation in the Clubs, drawing-rooms, and last, but most important, the Press.

London was not so large a city nor so overcrowded that the news could not spread quickly.

The very first edition was sold out on the second day of its appearance. Mr. John Murray's little publishing house was literally besieged.

So the Pedestal of Fame was set up again and the new Idol installed with solemn rites.

One of these ceremonies might have been observed in progress at Lady Jersey's reception. Her spacious rooms were crowded. Men resplendent in Court dress chatted together. Ladies in elegant gowns, gleaming with jewels, whispered behind fans, laughed and tittered together in an hysteria of anticipation. All were assembled to meet the guest of the evening, Lord George Gordon Byron, the marvellous young poet and sixth Baron of Newstead. What a combination!

Was it any wonder that almost every woman in the room had spent the entire week in studying her appearance? The result was beyond reproach. The feminine dress of the period, be it mentioned, was a kind of daring modesty. It was long and clinging, showing every line of the female form, yet its design was so simple that no one could say it was startling. The tiny little bodice was simplicity itself, revealing as much of the wearer's natural charms as possible. Since the French Empire had recently introduced the Classic design into fashion and furniture with absurd incongruity, English ladies were now all faithful copies of Roman virgins and matrons in everything but morals.

"Is it true that Lord Byron is really writing another poem?" asked an elderly dame of her husband, who was standing by with a very bored expression.

"How should I know?" he answered with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Oh, but you must make inquiries. Please go to-morrow for me to Mr. Murray's and find out. I positively long to read it. Be sure to order me the first copy."

" I should not trouble if I were you, my dear Susan."

" And, indeed, why not ? "

" It by no means follows that because Lord Byron has written one good poem, he will ever do so again," returned the gentleman with a languid air.

" You are simply odious, I do declare, sir," answered the lady ; " how could he ever write anything that is not perfectly adorable ? "

This argument seemed unanswerable.

" Really, this Byron craze is becoming a positive nuisance," he muttered, and to the unspeakable relief of the aggrieved husband, he found a sympathetic friend who expressed the same opinion. It was some consolation to discover that the other deprecated all this hero-worship as extremely undignified and quite unaccountable.

" Of course," concluded the speaker, " I may be mistaken."

The lady's husband assured him he was not.

" It is not merely his poetry," said a military-looking guest, who overheard and joined in the conversation. " This Lord Byron is supposed to be so deucedly good-looking."

" Sir," interposed a solemn-looking individual, " permit me to remind you that we have not assembled here to-night to pay homage to any man, attractive or otherwise. We are here to honour the cause of Literature. Let us be impersonal, pray."

" They say the poem has great merit, the Press are quite agreed on that point," interposed another man.

The solemn-looking speaker surveyed them all.

" I have read ' Childe Harold ' myself. It is,—how shall I express it,—excellent," he concluded.

" There can be no second doubt about it if Mr. Josiah Spoffinton rates it so highly," simpered a young lady making him a deep curtsey.

" Madam, I am honoured," returned Mr. Spoffinton with a low bow.

" May I venture to hope you have also found time to peruse my own unworthy efforts . . . a few verses composed on the Prince Regent and his touching reconciliation with his most noble Sire ? "

" It was printed, I trust." The lady blushed up to the roots of her hair, and looked confused.

" Printed, I believe, by the *Edinburgh Review*," returned the distinguished author in deep dejection, whether at his own

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audacity in presuming to write, or the extreme condescension of the journal in question, was not quite clear.

" What, the paper that criticized Lord Byron's early poems so harshly ? " inquired a bystander.

" Faith, sir, the paper that Lord Byron nearly demolished, and most of us poor scribblers at the same time," struck in a short, merry-looking gentleman with a delicious Irish brogue. " Why, I nearly challenged him myself."

" A duel ! Oh dear, how shocking," cried a Lady, evidently under the impression that someone had fought somebody else, and that the victim might, save for providence, have been Lord Byron. " Is that why he has not arrived ? " she cried, looking around in alarm.

Mr. Thomas Moore, in all good heartedness, hastened to reassure her.

" My dear Madam, didn't you know ? Well, then, when Lord Byron published his first book of poetry two years ago, Mr. Jeffrey, the Editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, tore it to pieces. Of course, we all said that poor Lord Byron was finished as an author. . . . Not a bit of it. What does he do, bless you, but set to work, and write such a satire that the paper nearly closed down ? And now we have the *Edinburgh Review* grovelling in the dust at his Lordship's feet. There's courage, my dear madam ; not another man in England would dare to tell the high and mighty press what he thought of them. But, then, he comes of a race of fighters. Faith ! Lord Byron's as good a soldier as he is a poet, I say."

" I knew he must be noble, Mr. Moore. I felt it as soon as I read his first verses," cried the ecstatic matron.

The crush near the door increased as the other guests arrived. The heat grew intolerable. But the ladies bore the pushing and squeezing, and only fanned themselves more vigorously. A few of the wily ones resorted to strategy.

" Do you mind, my dear, if I stand in front of you ? " whispered one short damsel to a tall thin one who looked down on her with cold disdain. " You see," she added, " you will be able to look over my head, and I " . . . the other moved away. The touching appeal had not made any impression.

" I believe Lord Byron has a secret," whispered one of the girls to her companion. " A mysterious past."

" I am sure of it," returned the other, preening herself ; " when I spoke to him at Lady Melbourne's, I could realize that he had suffered."

"Indeed," was the cold response. "I was not aware that you had met him before."

"My mother knows Lady Melbourne well, they are old friends, and she has promised me a private interview with him."

This, by the way, was a slight exaggeration, for the lady in question, who seemed so sure of her good fortune, had only caught a glimpse of Byron as he stepped into his carriage outside Melbourne House.

"You are surely rather daring," answered her friend, coldly. "I suppose you know he is rather . . . well, how shall I express it . . . well, anyway, part of his 'Childe Harold' is actually founded on real life." Then she added, darkly, "HIS OWN."

"How perfectly glorious!" cried the reckless one, and promptly made a dash for the door so as to be near the dangerous Lord Byron directly he entered the room. Unfortunately, in her haste, she created the impression that he had arrived. In another moment the door was literally besieged with a mass of panting, struggling femininity, all scrambling to be first.

"Ladies! Ladies!" cried Lord Jersey, who was then endeavouring to force his way through the entrance, "I must really beg of you to retire further back."

The army of feathers and fans retired in confusion.

"Will he NEVER come?" gasped one perspiring worshipper, "this is really most extraordinary."

But the most surprising thing of all was that everyone seemed to have forgotten that the chief reason for their presence to-night should have been that His Royal Highness, the Prince Regent, had most graciously intimated his intention of coming, and commanded that the rising young poet should be presented to him.

Alas! the "first gentleman in Europe" was overlooked for the time being. As a matter of fact he only managed to keep himself well in the public eye by his own ostentatious management.

There were many things of vast importance . . . to himself. He never lost sight of them. One was, that when the poor stricken creature, ironically known as the King of England, should be gathered to his forefathers, he, the Regent, would be George the Fourth.

Secondly, that he had invented the most marvellous pair of

shoe buckles ever known in the History of Fashion. In size and brilliance they were calculated to dazzle the senses and blind the eyes of his devoted subjects. Such is the force of Genius when allied to Royal blood.

But appreciation was sadly wanting in the public mind. Those buckles had faded from the memory of all the assembled guests that thronged the rooms and staircases of Lady Jersey's mansion.

There was a stir, a chattering, a fluttering, a waving of fans and a hum of excitement as the evening wore on. A start of wild anticipation whenever a name was called out by the servants, a groan of disappointment when it was found that the newcomer was only an ordinary mortal like themselves.

At last, somewhere about ten o'clock, one name rang out in the depths of the great hall, and ascended in stages until it reached the top.

"LORD BYRON."

In less time than it takes to tell, the ball-room was empty, and all the guests had assembled at the top of the grand staircase, lining up on each side as if by common consent. The murmurs died away into complete silence. All eyes were fixed on the remarkable-looking young gentleman who now slowly ascended.

A more arresting personality could not have been found in England or elsewhere for that matter. His appearance cast a kind of spell over all present. There was something unearthly in the pallor of his fine classic face, crowned with a mass of auburn curls, and a light in the glorious blue eyes that illumined his countenance. His beauty was, as one of the guests had truly described it, haunting.

In a period when dress was criticized, his passed without a comment. There was no need. It was in perfect taste and harmony with the rest of his appearance. But the subconscious power of intellect and imagination in his face drew all eyes away from other details.

If a spirit had suddenly appeared and ascended in their midst the assembled company could scarcely have felt more awe.

All preserved a deep silence.

They had plenty of time to observe him at leisure. A slight limp was quite noticeable, though he gave no outward sign of the intense physical pain it was causing him. His foot, however, was the thermometer of his emotions. At that

moment he was so nervous that the stick he was leaning on shook in his slender hand.

Not a word was spoken until he reached the landing. Then, Lady Jersey, the sweet gracious hostess, advanced to greet him.

"Welcome, my dear Lord Byron," she said smiling, and extended her hand. He bent over it.

"The honour is mine," he answered.

Then offered his arm to her. The two made their way back to the reception room. The crowd broke up and followed them. The buzz of voices commenced again. All the women's hearts beat with tremulous excitement. They blushed furiously when the ceremony of introduction commenced.

Lord Byron greeted them one after another with the grave dignity of a young king. His manner was most courteous but extremely aloof. Every fair admirer was convinced that he had some secret sorrow, and that she alone was the one soul who alone could "understand and comfort him." The men were deeply interested despite their prejudices against the folly of hero-worship.

To one and all, His Lordship was the same. He might have been watching a pageant from a great distance. He was certainly no part of it. There lay a barrier between him and the throng.

Later on the male guests grew critical. The adoration of the ladies increased in proportion.

Then, one gentleman who had been regarding Lord Byron with a puzzled air, fingered his stock and frowned. Another man did the same. The frown appeared on quite a number of brows. A little group of critics drew together, all fingered their stocks and knitted their brows in unison, then they gazed at each other in astonished awe.

Lord Byron's neck was bare.

One fact was now established beyond a doubt. The new Idol would never, no never, "'pon my word," hold his proud eminence as long as Beau Brummel. All agreed. More surveying through glasses. More shrugging of broad shoulders. Then the military guest spoke.

"The stock, sir, is an established part of the national dress."

The gentlemen nodded their heads.

"Lord Byron's poetry may be good," pursued the speaker. "For my own part I have other more important duties in life

than reading verse ; it may possibly be good, but does that excuse this breach of taste ? "

Younger men now joined the critics. They all surveyed the rebel with silent disapproval.

The Hero of the evening wore a soft, low collar, that lay open, and displayed a throat of extreme whiteness, yet beautifully full and muscular.

" By Gad," whispered Lord Alvanly, " this beats all ; what upon earth does he mean by it, I wonder ? "

" Done for effect, no doubt," answered Lord Holland, drily. " It suits him though. It created quite an impression at our house last week."

" What will the Regent think ? "

" Well, he is not likely to adopt it," answered Lord Holland with a smile. " It would scarcely suit his style, I think."

It was an open secret that the Prince of Wales suffered from an abnormal swelling of his glands, and that he had found Brummell's innovation most gratifying in consequence.

The elder men were firm. Nothing on earth should induce them to discard their stock collars. The dignity of England demanded they should uphold the Fashion. It would be disrespectful to the Regent ; it would be ridiculous to flatter Lord Byron's vanity by such a condescension.

But when they moved out of earshot, the younger members held a little council of their own. One of two of the wildest and most abandoned suggested that the best way to rival the poet was to imitate him. After all, we have to consider the ladies. They seem to like it. They dispersed stealthily and communicated their new resolve to other young gentlemen in various parts of the room. The result of this was that quite a large number of embryonic " Childe Harolds " were in the making before the evening terminated.

Beau Brummel's star had set for ever.

All this while, the guest of the hour, apparently quite oblivious of the tremendous sensation he was creating, was discussing the drama with Lord Essex.

" The stage, my dear Lord Byron, is going to decay. We need new actors for Drury Lane. Mr. Kemble is, of course, superb ; but the public like change. They need variety. We are all at our wits' end to know how to satisfy them."

" Really, why try ? " answered Byron, languidly. Lord Essex looked at him in surprise.

" Unless we do, the theatre looks like closing its doors very soon, for good, I fear."

" Oh, I see," answered his Lordship. " Well, why not try Master Betty for a change? The last time I saw him he was as stout as a young rhinoceros, and ranted like the veriest barn stormer If Mr. Kemble's tragedy is emptying the theatre, Master Betty's comedy may fill it for you."

" Is that intended for sarcasm, I wonder? " thought Lord Essex. The words, however, had been uttered quite gravely.

" I wish you would consent to take an interest in our Committee, Lord Byron," he said.

" Some day, perhaps. I'm rather fond of the drama. Mind, I do not believe in truckling to the pit or gallery. I say put on more good plays. Keep Mr. Kemble going in his best parts and things will right themselves in time," answered Byron.

Lord Essex shook his head.

" No, the time has come when we need fresh talent. I am sure of it. Dr. Drury agrees with me. He is travelling round the country to see if he can discover some young actor of the virile electric type. Mr. Kemble has ceased to hold the public. The classic taste is dying out, I fear."

The languor vanished. A boyish smile appeared on Byron's face.

" What! is Dr. Drury with you? " he cried warmly. " Why, he was my master at Harrow. That's capital. I really must come along one day to the Committee, if only to meet him."

" How charming and natural he is when he laughs," thought Essex, and was about to suggest a date for Byron to come to Drury Lane, when the servants called out in stentorian tones –

" His Royal Highness, the Prince Regent."

More rushing to the staircase, more fluttering and bowing, and a few seconds later the Prince of Wales sauntered in, strutting like a peacock with an air of insolent conquest.

His Royal Highness was resplendent in purple velvet, his coat adorned with a profusion of orders, a waistcoat of yellow satin, and a stock of black wreathed fold upon fold up to his ample chin. He wore white silk stockings and white shoes with, of course, the famous buckles. Lord, how they glittered! His little fat face was surmounted with stiff aggressive tiny curls that smelt strongly of Bergamot to those who stood nearest his person.

He greeted his hostess with a swaggering bow, and then

offered his arm. The pair had not proceeded far before they reached the spot where Byron was standing.

" Kindly present Lord Byron to us," he commanded.

Lady Jersey obeyed.

The introduction over, the procession was formed again, now headed by the Regent and Byron and followed by the gentlemen and excited ladies, who almost resented this monopoly of their idol.

" I must really congratulate you on your poem, Lord Byron," said the Regent graciously. " You must come to see us at Carlton House."

A wave of approval passed through the ranks of those behind them.

" Your Royal Highness honours me," answered Byron, his rich deep voice adding one more charm to his personality. It was modulated, and lingered on the air like a strain of music. He was often surprised by children stopping to listen to him when he spoke in the street.

" Your travels must have been most interesting, I should imagine ; you must describe them to us in detail," added the Regent. " I have never had the good fortune to spend so much time abroad, though I once visited the Nore."

If there was one excuse for the many delinquencies of this scion of royalty, it was his unfortunate boyhood. And even when he had long grown up he had rarely been allowed to leave the dull household of his narrow and foolish parents. This trip referred to had been made a subject for satire in many papers. And Byron, remembering the tragedy of his own early life, found himself listening to the Regent with a sympathetic interest. Up to now he had rather despised him.

" I suppose it's not surprising when a youth is let loose on the world that he should kick over the traces," he thought to himself. He found his Royal Highness very well read, and they conversed some time on literature.

This conversation, carried on as it was in the middle of the room, had the effect of making them both the centre of attraction, but after a while the Regent perceived there was a flaw in his scheme of gracious patronage. For when he moved away to greet other guests the crowd still remained around Lord Byron. This must be altered.

" Lady Jersey," he said, sharply. " I hope the dancing will now commence. We must not deprive our friends of that pleasure," he said, offering her his arm.

The strains of a waltz floated in from the other room. In a few moments most of the company had followed them in the direction of the music, and Byron found himself practically alone.

"A vast number of guests here to-night," said a voice behind him. He turned. One young lady had lingered behind, in the hope of now securing him as a partner.

"To tell you the truth, I have not counted them," he answered, and wearily dropped into a seat.

"Ah, your Muse raises you above the ordinary thoughts of life," gushed the damsel, clasping her hands, and looking at him with an adoring gaze.

"I never bring her with me to these affairs."

His answer disconcerted her. She paused.

"No doubt you keep her for the sacred silence of your own study."

Byron looked down, tapped his fingers impatiently on the arm of his chair. He made no attempt to hide the fact that he was bored. The waltz sounded louder.

"Pray, don't let me keep you from dancing," he said.

"Shall we not go together?" she whispered.

He glanced at her under his drooping eyelids.

"I never dance." His answer was curt.

"Then let us sit together and talk of your wonderful poems."

"No! No! If you will excuse me," he replied, in a tone implying inward torture.

"He has a secret sorrow," thought the fair one, and with a last fleeting glance of sympathy she stole away on tiptoe.

Byron drew a long sigh, and the mask of languorous indifference changed to an expression of agony. His face flushed and paled again. He clenched his hands together, glanced towards the ball-room, suddenly closed his eyes and bowed his head. The sound of that strain seemed to hurt him.

"Hullo! Byron, tired?" said a cheery voice, and John Cam Hobhouse crossed the room. "How much longer are you staying?"

"Not another second, Hobby. I'm going now. Let me get home."

The words were spoken with a sudden fury. Hobhouse saw the look flash and fade, leaving the fine white face as proud as before. He noted also that the limp was more evident than usual, and that the slight figure leant heavily on the stick as Byron rose and moved towards the door. His own fine brown

eyes were very tender. The two had been more than brothers for some years now.

" I'll come along with you to St. James' Street, " he said with affected lightness. " This sort of thing," he waved his hand towards the ball-room, " is not much in my line."

" Nor mine either ! I loathe it ! "

Another man might have blundered at that moment. Not so Hobhouse, trusty friend and chivalrous gentleman. He walked beside his friend as if it was the most natural thing in the world to leave a reception before it was half over. Any other man might have also offered a supporting arm. It would have been natural enough under the circumstances. It was easy to see that Byron was now in acute pain. His head was held proudly erect, and he stepped along with firm determination. Hobhouse knew that something unexpected had taken place. What was it that had caused such a wave of emotion ? He knew the moment of confidences must come sooner or later. He asked no questions now. That was not his way.

CHAPTER TWO

The clock of St. James' Palace struck half past twelve.

Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, windows were lighted and carriages passed backwards and forwards continually.

This was the street of clubs. Brookes', White's, the Cocoa Tree and Boodle's, as well as others too numerous to mention, rubbed shoulders and criticized each other with a brotherly interest. For the rest, this particular locality was a mixture of business and leisure. There were few private houses occupied entirely by the owners.

Berry Brothers, the favourite Wine Merchants, had their premises alongside Pickering Place (where some doubtful happenings were suspected regarding cards and dice).

This demure little courtyard, hidden behind the busy street, harboured one of the worst gambling "Hells" in town. But, of course, the "Front" never knew what the "Back" did in St. James'.

Not far from Berry's on the same side, and divided from the establishment by this same suspicious Pickering Place, stood Number Eight, the lower part of which was a dim and mysterious chemist's shop, whose window was lighted by a red lamp on one side and a green one on the other, and above were three excellent floors which formed the town residence of Lord Byron.

In the reception room, on the first floor, Fletcher, his Lordship's valet, contemplated the street from the window.

He had lighted the lamp and arranged a pile of letters on the table. It had, as usual, been rather a busy evening. Many bouquets of flowers had arrived. He had occupied himself with placing them in jars. Some still lay in great heaps among the decanters on the sideboard.

Fletcher the indispensable, the faithful, the truly affectionate servant of many years' service, rubbed his hands together and placidly surveyed the floral offerings.

They had been sent with little scented notes tied to them.

This sort of thing was an every-day occurrence. The room had the atmosphere of a florist's and a perfumer's rolled into one.

The valet went into the bedroom and performed his usual routine. An elaborate dressing-gown was laid ready, slippers placed close by. Then the counterpane was turned back and the lamps looked to.

After this, Fletcher resumed his vigil.

It was just one of many to him. He never knew what time his Lordship would return. It was pretty sure to be late. But, whatever the hour, Fletcher never thought of going to rest. Had there been a dozen servants ready to deputize, he would have rejected the idea with indignation. When and how he contrived to make up his own sleep remained a mystery.

His master was wont to say, " I believe you go off like a horse, standing up. Take my advice and sit down after eleven o'clock, in case you fall over ! "

Fletcher took these little pleasantries with the same quiet respect that he received any scoldings, and when the Byronic temper was aroused they were a pretty severe test of his own. But to resent anything his Lordship said never entered his mind. Had he not been in his service from the days when Byron had been a friendless wild young colt ? How often had he stolen down in the dim hours of the morning to let in the truant who had dashed out of the house to escape Mrs. Byron's temper and ridden madly over to seek consolations of his friends the Chaworths of Annesley Hall.

The violent quarrels between mother and son at the Abbey had been a source of much heated talk in the servants' quarters. Needless to say, they had always been detailed to the other servants in the neighbourhood. Few people cared to call on Mrs. Byron in consequence.

In a vain endeavour to uphold Byron's reputation in the matter, Fletcher had always acted as kind of censor on all reports. His words were received without question by the rest of the staff at Newstead Abbey.

When the housemaid rushed downstairs one day in a perfect panic to report that his Lordship had tried to murder his mother with a poker and she must therefore give her notice on the spot, it was " Mr. Fletcher " who brought his skilled research to bear on the merits of the case. He made the important discovery that there had been a poker thrown.

But the weapon had been hurled by the irate Mrs. Byron at her innocent son's beautiful head.

Result: overwhelming sympathy with "his poor young Lordship," who quitted the court without a stain on his character.

Now, as an impartial authority, it was surely an error on the part of Fletcher to overlook the important evidence that a second weapon had been found on the floor, the shovel, together with a good deal of damaged china. Mrs. Byron adored her precious crockery. And also he entirely omitted to mention that Byron had been assisted to bed that night in a parlous state of intoxication.

But the valet's way of stating the case may be summed up in his own words. "It's all along of her temper. Women are aggrewating creatures, the best of them!"

Certainly Mrs. Byron had been a genius in the art of driving a high-spirited youth to desperation. But how many times the worthy Fletcher saved his master's damaged reputation in the servants' hall must remain a matter of conjecture.

He smiled now at the recollection, and mentally contrasted the volcanic boy of those days with the elegant Lord Byron, the idol of Society and most famous poet of his age.

"It just wants Miss Augusta here to make it perfect," he said aloud.

In his estimation Byron's half-sister, the Hon. Augusta Leigh, was only just a little removed from the angels.

Occupied with these reflections, the time passed quickly. The clock had just struck one. Soon after a carriage drew up at the door.

Fletcher was down in an instant to admit his Lordship and Mr. Hobhouse. They ascended the winding stairs and entered the room. Byron threw off his cloak and looked around.

"For heaven's sake open the window," he said, and went off into his bedroom. Fletcher quietly did so.

"Does his Lordship want you?" asked Hobhouse, critically examining a large bunch of roses through his eyeglasses.

"No, Mr. Hobhouse. When his Lordship goes in like that it's a sure sign he wants to be alone. I should only be in the way," answered Fletcher solemnly.

"I believe you know him better than most of us."

"Well, sir, I've always made it my business to make

observations, so to speak. In all the years I've served his Lordship I know when he likes to be helped into his dressing-gown and when he wants to put it on hisself."

Hobhouse smiled. The man's simple way of expressing himself implied a familiarity with the Byronic moods that the speaker would have modestly disclaimed as "above his station."

At this point Byron returned robed in blue velvet and a decidedly irritable temper.

"That's better," he said; "the place is stifling. Fletcher, I can see you've had plenty to do to keep you out of mischief. Who the devil sent all these? Do they imagine I died in the night?" But he took up the roses and buried his face in them with a sigh of content.

"They are rather lovely, anyway; eh, Hobby?"

"Eminently suitable for a lady's boudoir, but a bit out of place here," answered Hobhouse, who was strongly opposed to the exotic.

"Fish!" cried Byron.

"I beg your pardon?" Hobhouse was nettled.

Fletcher stepped forward.

"Is there anything else you require, my Lord?"

"Yes. A damned good drink, and then you had better get to bed; you must be tired out." He looked at his watch-dog with a smile.

"Anything for you, Mr. Hobhouse?"

"No, thank you, Fletcher."

After placing the wine on the table the valet retired.

"What a good fellow he is," said Hobhouse. "Did I hear you say he contemplates getting married? I hope you won't have to part with him."

"Part with Fletcher! Good heavens! why, he's part of the Abbey and furniture. Why, he actually came to me and asked if I had any objection to his entering 'the marriage state,' as he put it. But I must find room for his wife on the staff. It's a little awkward here."

Byron helped himself to wine and then sank down into the depths of an armchair.

Hobhouse looked down on him critically. He noticed the look of weariness under the great blue eyes.

"Why not follow Fletcher's example, and then you could set up a town residence of your own, complete with augmented staff?" he said, sitting down beside him.

" Hobby, are you trying to be a humorist ? It does not suit you, my friend," was the curt response.

" Sorry ; I apologize," replied the other.

" Oh, for God's sake, stop apologizing. That's the second time in ten minutes."

Byron rose and limped over to the window, where he stood looking down on the street for some seconds in silence. It was clear that something was seriously wrong. Hobhouse tried another topic.

" By the way, I looked in at Melbourne House early this evening ; there were many anxious inquiries about you. Lady Caroline Lamb among the rest. She seemed very emotional. I can't think why ? "

" I suppose it strikes you as strange—strange that anyone should have any real feeling at all," answered Byron bitterly.

" It strikes me you are in a very bad temper to-night, and if I cannot help you perhaps I had better go."

Hobhouse's usually calm temper was roused for the moment. But in another moment he was standing beside Byron with his arm around him.

" What's the matter ? " he asked gently. " Can't you trust me ? "

" I'm going through hell," blurted out Byron. " Don't take notice of anything I say, Hobby, old man. You know I don't mean it."

" When you are worried I never take you quite literally," replied Hobby. " But if you would rather be alone ? " he paused.

" I've been that all my life," answered Byron sadly. " It's no new experience to me. And the worst place to be conscious of it is in a crowd. I felt that to-night."

" Yes. Hero-worship must be extremely trying at times," said his friend. " I'm afraid that is the penalty of fame. You cannot have one without the other."

" I want neither," cried Byron, with a ring of pain in his deep voice. " There's only one thing I have hungered for and Fate snatches it away every time from my grasp. It isn't Fame. It's Love."

" Ah, that again ! " Hobhouse made a gesture of protest. " Byron, do not reopen that old wound if you can help it."

" It's never healed for me." Byron dropped into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

" What is it now ? " asked Hobhouse gently.

" My poor Mary is having more trouble. That cur Musters. By God, I would like to shoot him," Byron blazed out. " He has been taking low women home to Colwick Hall. Ill treating her—breaking her heart. She's been ill. . . ."

" Has she written to you ? " asked Hobhouse quickly. Byron shook his head.

" No. Some old friends, the Pigots, you remember them ? "

" Yes, I think so."

" Elizabeth wrote to me this week about it all."

" Rather unwise of Miss Pigot to trouble you," was the quiet comment. Byron sprang up and faced Hobhouse in a fury.

" Oh, that's the view most people would take. I didn't expect it of you, John. So poor Mary Musters is to be lonely, unhappy and ill, but I must know nothing. Go on my way rejoicing and leave her to bear it all."

" Byron, what happened last time ? " questioned Hobhouse. Byron made a gesture of protest.

" That's past, I tell you ; this time would be different. I know it, I feel it."

" You believe so." Hobhouse spoke very gently but firmly, and Byron listened to him with a look of terror on his face.

" Face facts, Byron. You want to think it would all end as you wish. I understand. But when you came home from abroad, just after your mother died and her husband's cruelty has forced her to leave his roof for a time, yet she went back to him. And why ? Because of her good name. And the barrier of the Chaworth pride, that has been untouched by slander, will always be a barrier between you. Mary Musters is not for you."

Byron broke out in fierce invectives against John Musters.

" This is useless," persisted his friend. " Which is the best ? To take up your life again now with all its great promise, its splendid triumph, and turn your thoughts elsewhere, or to brood over Mrs. Musters and go back to that miserable time of ' trying to forget ' ? What happened at Cambridge ? You were drinking there day and night. I know. Properly going to the devil. You can't deny it, Byron. Mary Chaworth had just refused you, and married the man of her own free choice."

He stopped as he saw Byron wince.

" Forgive me," he added. " Heaven knows I hate to cause you pain, but after all, she could have chosen you. You

went abroad. You come back to us all restored to health, your great genius awake, the world at your feet. Don't tempt Fate too often. That's my advice."

The fire had died out of Byron's eyes now. His face grew sad. He spoke now in a low, toneless voice that touched his hearer more than any outburst of grief or anger.

"I suppose it is true. It's the curse of Annesley on me and my race. To love the last daughter of that house, lose her, and still go on loving her! . . . It may be just, but O God, it's very cruel, Hobby."

"Byron, don't think of it like that."

"Why not? You can see it's my blood," continued Byron, getting wildly excited now. "I am tied down by William Byron's act. I feel him sometimes within me. He lives in me. Well, there's an end."

He was pacing up and down the room, clenching his hands together.

"Superstition is unworthy. It's a coward's refuge," said his friend. Byron stopped and faced him defiantly.

"Don't think I am afraid," he cried scornfully. "If I am to go to perdition, I'll do it with my eyes open, and there will be no fear about it either."

There was a dangerous look in his face now that Hobhouse always feared. Whenever Byron was baffled or thrown back on himself, an elemental wildness and terrible recklessness flashed out.

"You are a poet; I know that much," said Hobhouse intensely; "and to one of your nature Love takes a deeper tone, a wider and grander meaning than to the rest of us."

"Grander!" Byron laughed scornfully. "Don't idealize the poet in me, my friend. The William Byron part of me is more like a devil at times."

"I do not believe that you or any man can be bound by the act of the dead," answered Hobhouse.

"Do they die or do they pursue us afterwards? That's the question I often put to myself."

"No; the question you should ask yourself now is how you can defy misfortune and live out your life on the nobler plan," was the firm reply.

Byron moved away and sat down at the table, turning over his letters, and made no reply.

"Now listen to me," pursued Hobhouse, coming to his side.

" There is no question of your going to perdition or any nonsense of that kind. But you do not seem to realize what it means to a lady of Mrs. Musters' reputation and character to break her marriage vow. To such a rare nature as hers must be, the sanctity of that sacrament is binding. She would be less worthy of your devotion were it otherwise."

" But what of John Musters and his infidelities ? "

" That's different. A man's excesses are one thing. A woman's frailties another. Duty is in her blood. She is pure, sweet and noble, from all you have told me of her. These very qualities make the step you wish her to take impossible. The Chaworths of Annesley Hall are a great race. It seems to me, Byron, that there is a force stronger than her own weakness that is drawing her away from you now."

" And a mightier force still drawing me back to her," cried Byron, starting up. " It is there every hour of my life. I know it. I feel it. What is the reason that, try as I will, I cannot forget her ? I have tried. Done my utmost to put her away out of my life. Every time I think I am free. . . . She calls to me. . . ." He paused and looked around. " I hear her voice so close to me at times, and night after night I dream of her still, and always on that terrace among the roses. When I go out I am reminded of Mary. A woman with hair her colour was sitting in a box opposite to mine at the theatre two nights ago. I could have sprung across and taken her in my arms. It was so real. The music to-night brought back the silly little Matlock dances, when I used to sit at the back of the room and see other men lead her out to dance. Oh, the " Lame Boy " could not join in even then. She's always been snatched away from me. John Musters came between us and robbed me of her. But I swear her soul is mine, and we can flash across the spaces together and meet in spite of all."

No words could describe the marvellous range of music in Byron's voice as he poured out the words. He was despairing, wild, exultant, and sublime by turns. Hobhouse listened spellbound. He saw one passion after another sweep over the proud, sensitive face. Where was the languid, petted idol of the drawing-rooms now ? Gone ; and instead, a creature alive with passionate feeling, vibrating with tense emotion. It was so with him when his friend had seen him on the ship when Byron had sat in the prow, pouring out one stanza after another of that marvellous " Childe Harold."

"Is it his genius exalts his love or his love that uplifts his genius?" thought Hobhouse.

"Byron," he said slowly, "you have been gifted with such an abnormal capacity for joy and sorrow that I feel afraid for you at times. I would give much to see you at rest, at peace."

The splendid head was tossed back, and the great blue eyes flashed like lightning.

"Peace, Hobby? God forbid! If I suffer I can also live and feel. Give me suffering a thousand times rather than stagnation. There is a death in life that I dread most of all."

He broke off with a shiver and turned away; then spoke in an ordinary manner with an attempt at lightness.

"I shall never marry. I could not settle down to the ordinary conventional routine. He laughed, and added, "Something in me demands the tempest, I suppose, so I must not grudge the price."

"It at least enriches your work," answered his friend. Byron turned an inquiring gaze on him.

"Hobby, I wonder why everyone thinks that a poet lives to write for others, never for himself. I write because it eases my soul. And Mary, God bless her! is behind every line of it. Do you think I care for fame? How long does that last, anyway?"

Hobhouse considered.

"You must go on with the work as you have commenced it," he answered thoughtfully. "And above all you must not think too lightly of your great gift."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't talk like Macaulay or Wilberforce. Look on me as a human being, not a machine for turning out verse by the yard. Damn posterity, I say!"

"What on earth am I to say to console you?" asked the other, with a mock despairing gesture.

"Give me a good drink. No, brandy, not wine. I'm as cold as ice," answered Byron abruptly.

The emotional mood had vanished, leaving the usual reaction.

Hobhouse filled a glass, gave it to Byron, who drained it and held it out again.

"No; you have had enough."

"Half," said the incorrigible one, holding out the glass again.

"Well, if you must emulate Scrope Davis, here you are." Byron held up the brandy to the light.

" Poor old Scrope ! Don't blame him for seeking oblivion. It helps him to forget his losses at Watier's, I expect," he said.

" I'd rather help him to forget Watier's," answered Hobhouse. " One of these days he will go under. The stakes there are enormous. Far too high for anyone except the Prince Regent, and the country pays his gambling debts. They won't pay Scrope's."

" The Regent has the proud privilege of blue blood, my friend. That old reprobate, Charles James Fox, will vote any amount for him. So when the Jews become too troublesome at Carlton House, there is a new petition to lay before the House, ' praying whereby that the income of the Heir Apparent may be fixed at a sum more in proportion to his immense responsibilities.' "

Byron mimicked the voice of Fox to perfection. Hobhouse grinned.

" It is time all that sort of thing should be put a stop to."

" Wait till John Cam Hobhouse represents Westminster," responded Byron. He then turned back to his letters and began to open them.

" Rather late for attending to correspondence," suggested the precise one, glancing at the clock and gathering up his cloak.

Byron laughed.

" Oh, you muffin ; I suppose you always read your letters at breakfast with the toast and marmalade," said Byron, and became absorbed in a letter which seemed to cause him some amusement. Hobhouse felt more at ease now Byron had relieved his feelings and seemed more himself. These hours of emotional confidences were sometimes a tax on his logical nature. But if there was any sympathy needed, anything practical to be done, there was no better friend or trustier confidant. No kinder soul on earth than this great-hearted, dignified John Cam Hobhouse. It might be said that dignity was his outstanding characteristic. Even among the wilder set at Cambridge he had always been respected and admired. But he was English to the core with his reserve and lack of outward demonstration. One had to know him in the secrecy of an intimate friendship to realize the genuine affection and deep emotion that lay buried behind a somewhat pedantic and impressive exterior.

He cast a look of tenderness at the curly head now bent over some papers, and then crossed to Byron to say good-night.

"You won't mind if I go now?"

"Eh?" The other looked up. "Oh! Going home now, Hobby? Of course, it's getting late; of course. What were you saying?"

"It's time you retired to rest, surely."

Byron nodded.

"Oh, and just a warning. If I were you, Byron, I would not let Lady Caroline Lamb take too much possession of you. . . . She is always trying to monopolize you when you visit Melbourne House."

Byron looked innocence itself.

"She is amusing; don't you think so?"

"No." Hobhouse was very emphatic on that point.

"Such a child," added Byron lightly; "and seems to have as much sense as her namesake."

"Before cultivating that young lady's acquaintance, I should consult Lady Melbourne."

"Mother-in-laws are always a nuisance," was Byron's careless reply. "Well, see you to-morrow, Hobby. Come along if you have the time."

"Very well. I will. Let us discuss our new club. Just you and I for members," said Hobhouse. They laughed at this, and soon after Hobhouse departed.

He walked down St. James' Street in the moonlight very solemn and serious. When a man rises to fame in a day and remains still disconsolate, it is rather perturbing. Especially when this same depression sometimes leads to seeking forgetfulness in the drinking of much brandy. Brains were not so plentiful that such a genius as Byron should waste himself. Hobhouse had always considered it part of his duty to encourage genius. He would not have acknowledged to himself that he had completely lost his heart, as much as one man can to another, to Byron. That he longed to father him. But he felt that from now he must keep an eye on that strange volatile being he had met at Cambridge—first disliked for his dandyism, then worshipped on close acquaintance. He had his own ambitions. Dreamed of political fame. But just at that moment he would have sacrificed all his hopes in that direction to see the light of happiness in those wonderful blue eyes and to have heard him laugh with that boyish enjoyment of life he had shown in those first days when they had come together; had sat for hours in their rooms, looked out on the fine old quadrangle and talked of future plans. There had

been times when Byron had been as happy as a school-boy—when he forgot Mary Chaworth. The time of her marriage had marked the first great change in him.

Hobhouse had heard all the story of his lonely boyhood and that violent harsh woman who had made Byron's life a misery by taunting her son about his lameness.

"He has never had a home, and he never seems to have known real love," thought his friend now. Then he arrived at his own door, let himself in and went upstairs. Before he retired he opened his diary. Wrote down the following:

"Went home with Byron, sat up with him till past three hearing his confessions." Here the entry ceased. He had heard many, but they were never recorded—except in his own heart.

Meanwhile Byron was reading over a letter written in a large sprawling hand. It was ill spelt and delicately perfumed. The writer offered him her jewels, her love, her honour—in fact, all that was hers and not hers to bestow. The greatest poet in the world had fired her soul and inspired her with a grand passion that must raise her to heaven or destroy her. It was signed by Lady Caroline Lamb.

He sat thinking over it for a long time: rose and went to the window. The sky was faintly tinged with light. His thoughts flew to a long stone terrace covered with roses. The bouquet lying on his table scented the room with its heavy fragrance. He closed his eyes for a moment and murmured a name.

"I'm a fool," he reminded himself after a pause. "Hobby is right. Mary is not for me."

With that he sat down and wrote an answer to the letter, placing it on the shelf where Fletcher would see it for posting the first thing in the morning. Then he went to bed.

After all, when there is nothing to be done, it is better to forget. Or at least try to do so.

He fell asleep just when the rest of St. James' Street was waking up. Poets are strange beings.

CHAPTER THREE

FAR away from the world of fashion, folly and wit, when the summer heat, three months later, was making London well nigh unbearable and parching up the country side, scorching the grasses and turning the harvest fields yellow long before their time; when a drowsy languor seemed to rest on man and beast alike, the hills of Annesley were shining gold and green in the mid-day sun.

The whispering firs and ever-changing bracken, the range of hills looking down on stately vales, through which the wild deer roam at will, forms a scene of loveliness to stir the heart of all.

Nature, gloriously arrayed, lies at our feet, and overhead the birds sing their anthems to the sun. Far away in the distance the lowing of cattle is borne on the breeze. There is music, above, around and beneath. Here Love might have been born, and sorrow bears no meaning at all to the mind that gives itself to unity with the purple lights in the great expanse of sky, the breeze that gently sways the foxgloves, harebells, and a myriad little wild flowers, the murmuring of bees and the rippling of tiny streams.

Yet many a tale of sorrow has been echoed by the trees, and this sweet vale was in itself a part of tragedy. Partings and tears have been witnessed by the trees, and the old eternal human destiny of unrequited loves, wild hopes, and brief visions of a fleeting paradise, have been played out here, not once but many times, upon its verdant stage.

Once for our story will suffice, and it is with the actors in that drama that we are now concerned.

It is one of the paradoxes of our existence that we are ever surrounded by the commonplace in moments of crisis. That these moments are indeed often precipitated by some ordinary event or individual.

Not that the lady seated in the carriage rapidly driving along the road towards Colwick Hall would have allowed anyone to

suggest that she, Mrs. Joseph Becker, could be considered "commonplace."

That term might possibly apply to her neighbours. The young lady now sitting opposite her had heard the term often used by her respected mother in that manner.

But Mrs. Joseph Becker looked on herself as a chosen mortal with a mission to the world. As the wife of the parish Vicar, it was clearly her bounden duty to preserve matrimonial harmony throughout her little portion of the universe. Other parishes might have households in which husband and wife separated or openly disagreed. But this could not be allowed in the neighbourhood of Annesley or Hucknall Torkard.

"Charlotte," she said firmly to her daughter, "it's no use for you to say another word. I intend to speak to our dear Mary very frankly to-day. The poor dear child needs a mother's counsel."

"But, mamma," reasoned the girl, "she has her own mother, and if we want to call on Mary to cheer her up, I think it perfectly horrid for us to discuss that wretched Musters at all."

Charlotte Becker was a bright roguish little creature with a great sense of humour, constantly suppressed by the weight of maternal authority.

Mrs. Becker surveyed the rebel severely, and replied:

"Since your return from London, Charlotte, I regret to say you appear to have lost all sense of maidenly modesty. You dare to argue with me, your mother, on such a subject. These matters are far beyond your comprehension. What do you know of the sacred duty of a wife to her husband, pray?"

"Why this, mamma," answered the girl with spirit, "that if any husband treated me as John Musters has done Mary, I would leave him for ever, and nothing on earth should induce me to return to him."

Mrs. Becker snorted like a dragon. In truth, elderly ladies on the warpath often resemble those amiable creatures. There are many species. The thin hawk-like type with glittering eyes, pale faces and tightened lips. The stout, florid kind who inflict maxims of uncomfortable wisdom on their unhappy victims with complacent smiles and unwelcome motherly interest. Mrs. Becker was of the last variety.

She was firmly convinced that marriage was especially designed by Providence to enable all good women to secure a

martyr's crown. No faithful wife ought to expect happiness. Such a husband as Mr. John Musters was a sure sign that Mary Musters was to be one more saint in the world beyond our own. She was also well aware that it sometimes happened that sorely tried wives sometimes forgot their duty. Ladies had been known to run away from their spouses and create "Scandal." But that sort of thing might happen in London. Not in the pure and godly town of Nottingham.

The wild excesses circulated about Mr. Musters might be true. But tea-table chatter whispered that his wife had spoken of rebellion at last: that she might actually leave the sacred precincts of her husband's roof. Prevention is better than cure. Mrs. Joseph Becker was determined to prevent this fatal step at all costs. She must reach Colwick Hall before the bird had flown and reconcile her to her cage.

"Understand, Charlotte, you are not to try and sympathize with Mary; to make her feel ill-used. Talk to her of our coming social and the new guild at the Church Hall. No silly talk about London; and I am very sorry I ever allowed you to go there at all." Then she added impressively, "And not one word about Lord Byron!"

"Mamma, he looked perfectly divine when I saw him in his box at the theatre," cried Charlotte; "and to think that he actually proposed to Mary years ago. Oh, how I wish she had accepted him. Do you think he is in love with her still?"

"Certainly not! From all I hear of that young man, he has now completely forgotten her. Yes, and everyone else in his own county long ago. And a nice life he led at Newstead Abbey! He nearly killed his poor dear mother. Yes, I believe it was sorrow at his debauchery that brought her down to her grave."

"Nothing of the kind. Elizabeth Pigot told me she had an awful temper. She drove him away because of her insults about his poor foot, and she died in a fury after receiving a bill."

"Charlotte," cried her mother, in tones of thunder that made the driver pull up the horses and look around to see what was the matter.

"Oh, go on do, man, I was not speaking to you," she added to him, concluding to Charlotte,

"How dare you speak of the dead in that way?"

"But to accuse poor Lord Byron of having killed his mother!"

Mrs. Becker waved her aside with a gesture.

" I said nothing of the kind. All the same, a son's wild recklessness always breaks a mother's heart. As to his thinking of Mary Chaworth, the thing we have to do is to avoid speaking of him in any way or encouraging her to think of him. Every paper is full of his doings. Ah, a man that writes poetry can never be any good ! I knew it would come to something like this when I heard of his drinking ways up at Newstead Abbey."

Charlotte still held her ground.

" If Mary had married Lord Byron she might have been happier than she is, anyway."

Mrs. Becker snorted with contempt.

" I consider Mr. John Musters a much more suitable match in every way. Yes, and when he has settled down and she has learnt how to manage him better . . ."

But at this moment the carriage turned into the grounds of Colwick Hall. It was a large, imposing-looking residence, and Mrs. Becker glanced at it approvingly. Then looked at her daughter with a knowing smile.

" Some day, my dear, if you keep your head and listen to your mother's advice, you may be the mistress of a splendid home like Mary's." The young lady was too exasperated to reply, and only glanced resentfully at her parent. The carriage stopped and they both alighted.

Was Mrs. Musters at home ?

Yes, she was in.

" Kindly inform her that Mrs. Becker and Miss Becker have arrived and would like to see her."

Saying which the elder lady sailed majestically into the hall followed by Charlotte. They were shown upstairs into the large sitting-room. The girl was all impatience to see her friend.

" I do hope she looks better than when I saw her at Annesley some time ago."

" She is now back in her own home; then she was merely an exile," answered Mrs. Becker frigidly. " Divorced from her own proper protector, to all intents and purposes, how could you expect her to look other than she did ? I could see her conscience was weighing her down."

Just then the sound of voices from the room above broke on their ears. A man's loud coarse bullying tones and a woman's tearful protestations.

" That's Mary's voice. I know it. What shall we

do? They're actually quarrelling," whispered Charlotte, rising.

"Sit down at once. We must not appear to have overheard," was Mrs. Becker's reply.

Her admonition was entirely unnecessary, for Musters' voice increased in volume. Both the ladies distinctly heard him shout:

"Let me have no more of these whinings. Understand, I do as I please in my own house, and if you don't like it, damn well get out. I've plenty of company."

The woman's voice replied something. They could not hear what she said. Then followed more railing from Musters, a loud slamming of a door. Then a long silence.

Charlotte looked at her mother.

"Had we not better go, mamma?"

"No," answered Mrs. Becker sharply. "I want to see her."

"But she will be so distressed," reasoned the young lady.

"I intend to see her. I have evidently come at a very important time. Perhaps it's all the better."

Mrs. Becker's curiosity was stronger than her desire to act as peacemaker. But under the latter heading she summed up all her own failings. As the Vicar's wife, it was her duty to know everything. How else could she put things right? As a matter of fact, she generally ended by making other people's troubles much worse. But she never lost her own self-importance. The ladies waited some considerable time and then heard Mr. Musters' voice bawling outside, ordering his horses, calling to his dogs. A woman's hard laugh chimed in.

"Mamma, who can it be?" asked Charlotte.

"Mr. Musters, of course."

"But the other? It was not Mary."

"I heard nothing else at all," answered her mother.

At this moment the door opened. They rose and turned. Mary Chaworth-Musters stood on the threshold. A tall, slender, fragile-looking girl, but with the dignity of womanhood. A strange mixture of childishness and matronly bearing. Timid, yet obviously trained to appear strong and calm.

"How beautiful she is," thought Charlotte, noting the sweet, pale face, delicate pallor, great startled eyes and masses of dark brown glossy hair dressed high on her head. She was not quite twenty-four but looked younger. As the heiress of Annesley Hall she had been accounted the most beautiful girl

in the shire. There was a poetry and elusive attraction about her.

" Mary, my dear, I am so glad to see you ; we had no time to write," cried Charlotte, going to her impulsively and kissing her.

" My dear child, how well you look," said Mrs. Becker, very untruthfully ; " and how is your dear mother ? "

Mary Musters kissed the girl and held out her hand to the elder lady with a curtsey.

" It is very kind of you to come to-day. Forgive my delay in receiving you."

The voice was very low and deep, and the words spoken with evident restraint. Mary was trembling from head to foot and her eyes were full of unshed tears. But she rose to her duties as hostess with an ease that was painful to witness. It was so clear she was accustomed to acting this part. There was no ring of heartiness or real feeling in her tone. At the sound of her husband's voice from outside she went white to the lips.

" Molly, you stay behind, I'll be back soon. Now then, call Sheik, down, you rascal ; down, I say," laughed Musters. A shrill feminine voice replied :

" I don't want him, Mr. Musters, he paws my dress." More laughter and talking. The three ladies remained silent until the sound of a horse's hoofs died away in the distance.

Mrs. Becker broke the strain by an assumption of great good humour.

" And how is your dear little daughter, my dear ? "

" Mary ? Oh, she is quite well, but I have not had news of her for these last few days." Charlotte looked surprised.

" Then she is not here with you ? "

Mary Musters paused before replying,

" No, not at present. But will you both have some tea ? "

She crossed the room, rang the bell and then sat down, plunging into an animated conversation with her guests on the state of the weather, the success of the agricultural show lately held, the prospect of an early harvest—in fact, every topic that might ward off discussion of a personal nature. She had grown to dread Mrs. Becker's friendly visits of late. The servant entered.

" You must really take something," she persisted. " A little wine, perhaps, if it is too early for tea ? "

Mrs. Becker consented. Charlotte declined.

"Nothing, Mary dear. I only want to talk to you."

The girl was deeply distressed by what she had overheard, and longed for a quiet chat with her. She hated to see that strained artificial manner, so alien to the bright high-spirited friend of school days. Mrs. Becker began to find her plans in danger of defeat. Try as she would to steer the conversation into intimate channels, to get her opportunity of "a word in season," her victim managed to elude her intentions. To make matters worse, Charlotte seemed determined to aid and abet Mary, rattling on in lively fashion. This was most annoying. The good lady frowned on her daughter, cleared her throat, and commenced the attack.

"Pardon my inquiry, my dear, but did I hear you really say that your daughter is not with you at present?" she inquired.

Mary Musters shook her head.

"No, she has been with my mother for some time. Since her second marriage she travels a great deal, and the child is now at Dorset with her and my stepfather."

Mrs. Becker became emotional.

"Is it wise, may I suggest, to allow the dear little one to be so far away? I speak in your interests, Mary dear."

"Why don't you travel too? It would be lovely for you," cried Charlotte impulsively.

"Charlotte," rapped out her mother, "I am speaking to Mary, and when we require your advice we will let you know."

Mary Musters smiled at the girl and then looked at her tormentor steadily.

"My dearest child," proceeded Mrs. Becker, "I speak to you as a mother. Believe that." She became tearful, and produced her pocket handkerchief. "As a mother," she repeated.

Mary Musters looked at the speaker and put her hand to her throat. Charlotte rose and went over to her, sat down and put her arm around the slender waist. Mrs. Becker proceeded:

"My visit here to-day, Mary, is not a formal one. I have something very serious to say to you. Something that affects your position, your happiness—I may add, even your soul's salvation. . . ." Here she paused as Mary put out her hand in protest and half rose.

"No, do not misunderstand me. I do not believe one

word of it myself. But people will talk, my child. People will talk."

"About what, Mrs. Becker?" was the quiet response.

"About any young wife who is not living on the happiest terms with her dear and lawful husband. Oh, I have heard much. More than I would repeat, Mary. But do not credit anyone who tries to influence you against poor dear Mr. Musters. There are many, I dare say, who would tell you . . ." She got no further, for Mary rose and faced her in anger.

"Let me tell you, Mrs. Becker, the very worst they can say of my husband is true," she cried wildly. "Oh, if you doubt it yourself you should have been here to-day, when he placed the last insult on me. Do not speak to me like this. I cannot bear it."

"Mary, my dear, mother did not mean anything to hurt you," said Charlotte, flashing a look of rage at her mother. She rushed to her friend and flung her arms around her.

"Yes, you are right. Mr. Musters is a brute, not worthy of you, and I think you are an angel."

Mrs. Becker sat speechless with anger at this rebellion.

"Don't you see how ill she looks, mamma? After what you did hear to-day, how can you speak to her like this?" added Charlotte.

And all the while the figure clasped in her arms was still, almost rigid.

"My dear, what is it? Mamma, what have you done?"

A sudden cry startled the visitors, and without any warning Mary Musters broke out into wild hysterical laughter and crying. Mrs. Becker went to Charlotte's aid, and between them they led her to a sofa, where she sank down in such a paroxysm of emotion that they feared for her reason. All thought of further advice was now driven out of Mrs. Becker's head. The only thing to be done was to restore the patient, if possible, without alarming the servants. The tension released, peal after peal of wild laughter rang through the room, then fits of shuddering and convulsive sobbing, while the fragile form shook and Mary's hands were twisting together like a vice. The attack lasted some time.

At last she became calmer. Charlotte held the dark head to her shoulder and kissed her repeatedly. Her mother bathed her forehead and induced her to drink a little wine.

It was no ordinary outburst. Mental agony lay behind it,

and Mrs. Becker looked at her in absolute terror. She was relieved but rather amazed when the sufferer recovered at last and was able to sit up, looking very dazed.

" I'm so sorry, forgive me ; this is dreadful of me, I know," she said faintly.

" What must she have gone through to break down like this ? " thought Charlotte.

Mrs. Becker was all concern. Mary must write to her mother. Then, as Mary appeared better, her own tendency to moralize got the better of her fears. She made up her mind to ignore the real facts and proceed with her original intention. So she talked on glibly. Of course, Mary was missing her own dear home. Many young wives felt strange at first. Considering Mary Chaworth had changed her maiden name to Musters five years ago, the suggestion was incongruous in the extreme. But one of Mrs. Becker's maxims was to ignore anything unpleasant and cling to convention at all costs.

" You need your little girl. You get lonely. She must come back. You should try to interest yourself, my dear, more in the work of the parish. I should adore it if you could form a sewing circle this winter "—and much more to the same point.

" Mrs. Becker, you spoke of rumours. Kindly tell me what they are," said Mary, with disconcerting directness.

" Did I, dear ? Well, no matter now."

" Oh God, let me have the truth from someone ! " cried the other. " You say you came here to warn me—that people are talking. What are they saying ? Tell me the truth at least." Mary clasped her hands imploringly.

" Well, dear, there is a lot of scandal about your wishing to leave Colwick Hall. I am sure it is all wrong. No woman of your family, my dear, would do such a thing. But it is talked about a great deal."

Mary passed a shaking hand across her brow and looked strangely at Mrs. Becker.

" You mean that people expect me to stay with my husband. Always, no matter what happens. I am to stay at Colwick Hall for ever ? "

The elder lady hastened to reply.

" Of course, we know you have trials. But with your dear mother's care of you, we look to you, Mary, my dear, to live up to that high ideal of wifehood. That should be your greatest consolation."

The sweet face grew very strained. Then she spoke in a whisper.

" I am a slave, then. I am never to be free, never to leave this tomb, this prison."

" You are not well, my dear, I can see that. Very well, we will not talk about it any more," said Mrs. Becker soothingly. " When you have had a good night's rest, then everything will be all right again. There is a silver lining to every cloud."

No one spoke after that for some time.

" Thank you." It was Mary Musters now who rose, calm and outwardly resolute. She talked on mundane matters for a while, and then tried to indicate to her visitors that she desired to be alone. But Mrs. Becker was in her glory. She had accomplished part of her errand. She must finish it. So down she sat again and launched out into a lengthy discourse on the glory of a honoured name, the bearing of the cross, the beauty of resignation to one's lot in life. She further expatiated on the strenuous manner in which she herself had defended Mary's name.

" My dear child, I have always said that you were the very living example of noble womanhood for all young wives to copy. And now you have the respect of all your neighbours. Think, my dear, how these slanders will die away as you live on here in your dignity and conscious pride. You will reform your husband. That will be your reward. Think, my dear, of the heavenly crown you gain hereafter if you persevere to the end."

It was a beautiful sermon, delivered in her husband's best style. The speaker flattered herself she had scored a great victory, for the pale face was very submissive now, and Mary listened in silence.

At last the good lady took her leave and sailed down the stairs followed by Charlotte, who waved a last kiss up to the motionless figure that looked down at her.

The drive home was a triumphal return.

" My dear Charlotte," said her mother, " I called in the very nick of time. I don't think we shall hear any more of Mary Musters leaving Colwick Hall. What a blessing ! I thought her look of piety and submission most becoming. There, I knew I could put things right."

And all the while Mary Musters was lying on her bed, having flown upstairs and locked herself in, repeating wildly :

" Byron, beloved, come back to me. Open the doors of

liberty again. Oh, come back to me. I love you. I want you. Come, and I will give myself to you with all my heart."

* * * * * *

She lay there for some time after her visitors had gone. The sound of a woman's shrill laugh on the terrace outside made her start up. Then the sound of horses' hoofs, and in a few seconds the buzz of voices below. She rose from the bed and stole to the window, peering through the blind.

Musters had returned with a party of men. He had dismounted and was now introducing his guests to the overdressed, vulgar-looking woman who stood by his side. She was receiving them with all the assurance imaginable. To all appearances she might have been the mistress of Colwick Hall. Soon after came a tap at the door. Mary hastened across, but did not unlock it.

"Yes, who is there?" she asked.

"Please, Mrs. Musters, the master wants to know if you are coming down to lunch."

"No, thank you, Newton. Tell Mr. Musters I have a bad headache and am lying down. Ask him to kindly excuse me."

The servant retired.

"Heartache, more like," he muttered. "A downright shame, I calls it." He went down to the dining-room and delivered his message to "handsome Jack Musters," a burly looking man with an arrogant manner and loud, blustering voice. He was seated at the table with his visitors, and the only "lady" guest was installed in honour at his right. He frowned.

"Gentlemen, you'll have to excuse my wife," he said, with an assumption of good humour. "Not very well to-day, delicate and all that."

Some of the men exchanged glances of obvious disapproval. Mrs. Ridgeton simpered,

"I 'opes as how she will soon be herself again, I'm sure, Mr. Musters."

The guests were quite aware of the strange situation. Some of them were by no means Musters' equal in position, but in their rough way they resented the open slight placed on their hostess. No one cared to speak openly, however. It was a difficult matter to teach their host how he should treat the long-suffering lady who had the misfortune to be his wife. Then Mrs. Ridgeton spoke with a nervous laugh.

" I 'opes, Mr. Musters, as I am not the cause."

Albert Lawton, a burly good-natured farmer, glanced at her impatiently ; coughed, and then ejaculated,

" That's an awkward thing to say, marm ; if you please we will just remember that Mrs. Musters is indisposed."

A murmur of approval followed. Another man, anxious to make light of the matter, suggested by way of a joke that the only lady in the room should preside for the time.

" Right for you, Mr. Campbell," said Musters, and rising he offered his arm to the woman, escorted her to the head of the table. Some laughed and applauded. Rough banter followed as the meal proceeded. Toasts were drunk. Lawton sat moodily, taking no part in the general conversation, and glancing occasionally at Musters with a frown.

Mrs. Ridgeton was now in her element. She kept up a running flow of coarse wit that delighted Musters as he leant back in his chair watching her.

" What a woman ! " he thought. " Why doesn't Mary come down and do her duty—keep things alive a bit ? Damn it all, what's a wife for if not to entertain her husband's guests ? "

" I trust, sir, that Mrs. Musters is not seriously ill," asked Lawton at length, when a lull in the conversation gave him the opportunity to be heard.

" Oh, I thought she looked very delicate indeed when I saw her this morning," said the lady with a malicious glance at him.

Musters laughed noisily.

" Good ! I'm glad you two had a chat together. When two women get together on frock and frills, there's no counting the time. Was that what kept you from coming to meet us ? "

Mrs. Ridgeton had been waiting for this chance. She seized it with both hands.

" Oh dear, no," she said at the top of her voice ; " it wasn't about anything like that, I can tell you. I'm sure I wish it had been half so pleasant, Mr. Musters."

Some of the men, sensing trouble, tried to change the topic and discuss the hunt, but she was not to be foiled. She saw that Musters had been drinking. She was smarting at the remembrance of a very brief and humiliating interview with Mrs. Musters. Here was a chance for revenge.

" Of course, if she was really ill I suppose that accounts

for it," she said ; " but really, the way your wife insulted me before the servants to-day . . . well, there ! "

She broke off as Lawton and some of the others rose from the table.

" Oh, she did, did she ?" yelled the host, and springing up from his seat he dashed over to the bell and rang it furiously. Cries of " Shame ! " and " Done purposely ! " broke from all present. The servant entered and waited for orders.

" Kindly go upstairs and tell Mrs. Musters she is to come down here at once, headache or no headache," said her husband, with vicious calmness. The man withdrew.

" I am sure I've done nothing," tearfully cried the lady. For the word had been passed round, and all the men now left their places and grouped themselves behind Lawton, who acted as their spokesman.

" Gentlemen," he said to them, " many of us have wives and daughters of our own. We cannot better show our respect for them than by bidding Mr. John Musters good-day."

" What the hell do you mean, Lawton ; how dare you insult me in my own house like this ? " shouted Musters, mad with rage.

" The only person affronted is Mrs. Musters. Kindly offer my very sincere apologies to your wife, sir, on my behalf," answered the farmer.

" And mine, and mine," broke out from the others.

" Come along, gentlemen ; no more words, if you please," said Lawton, and in less than three minutes they were hurrying away from the house, leaving their host swearing furiously and Mrs. Ridgeton wailing dismally.

" Oh, Mr. Musters, I must leave this 'ouse. It's terrible ; never have I been so affronted. Mrs. Musters ordered me to go to-day."

" When was this, pray ? " He sprang to his feet.

" Soon after you came out of 'er room. She actually told the servant to order the carriage and see my boxes brought down. I let 'er know I wasn't going to be sent off until I saw you about the matter. I told 'er plain enough I was your guest, not 'ers."

" Why didn't you tell me this when I returned ? "

" What, afore all those men ! How could I ? "

Musters struck the table till the glass shivered.

" Right, my girl ! Up you go to your room and stay there. I'm going to have this little matter settled once for all."

He kicked a chair aside and strode out of the room. She watched him with a spiteful look, filled a glass of wine, drank it and laughed softly to herself.

"I think I know who's leaving this 'ouse now, my fine lady," she said. Then heard Musters striding along the corridor towards Mary's room. Mrs. Ridgeton stole to the door and heard him pause outside, kick the woodwork, and shout out to his wife to open the door unless she wanted it broken in. Then the former flew out, upstairs, and betook herself to her own boudoir until the little difference should be settled.

"Mary, open this damned door, or I'll smash it, I tell you, do you hear?" yelled the surly brute.

Mary suddenly did as he requested. Then retreated back as he entered the room.

"Now then, my lady, what's the meaning of this?"

Her face flushed. She drew herself up to her full height and faced him. Mary Musters could look like a young queen at times, and nothing more enraged her lord and master than to feel the cold contempt she could show him, when provoked.

"Oh," he sneered; "so you're going to play the injured wife, are you? Having insulted all my friends and driven them away, I am to play the repentant husband."

"Leave me; go out of my sight," cried Mary, with such vigour that it took him by surprise. He laughed and threw himself into a chair.

"I'm about tired of your airs and graces; I mean to put you in your place for once. Sit down, Mary. It's about time I had a say about my own grievances. Oh, I don't go round the country like you, telling all the neighbours that my wife does not care a damn for me. That she spends her time in mooning round, fancying herself ill-used. That she refuses to take her place at table when I have visitors, and drives them away with her cursed coldness. Let me tell you, madam, there are two sides to every case, and I do not intend to let you have it all your way much longer."

She had remained standing, and looked down on him scornfully.

"Spread what rumours you like," she replied. "Such a version as the one you have mentioned would not be believed an instant."

"You make too sure, my lady." His voice became ominously calm. "There is a reason no one has guessed for

all this trouble. Oh, you make a grand pretence of being obliged to remain at Colwick Hall, but if I was such a bad husband, as you say, your mother would be the first to want you to go back to Annesley Hall."

Mary shrank back now, and her self-possession gave way to a look of fear. He saw it and laughed triumphantly.

"Ah, you didn't think I knew. Quite a coincidence, wasn't it, that Lord Byron should be staying at Newstead when you were under the protection of your own home!" His voice rang out like a knife.

"How dare you!" she gasped. "How dare you! Oh, I have been true to you, at what a cost! To come back here and live under the same roof with your mistresses!—and even to-day . . ."

He rose in a fury.

"By God, Mary! Look out, I say! The damned insolence of it! To order my friend, Mrs. Ridgeton, out of the house like a dog!"

"Your friend?"

He gripped her wrist, bruising it as he did so. She winced with the pain and tried to release herself.

"Struggle away! I'll loose you when I've had my say. I'm sick of it, my lady. Your everlasting whining is getting beyond everything. It comes to this: eight of the best men in the place left my house to-day because of the way you insulted them; refusing to come down and take your seat at the table, like any other woman who knows her duties. People are snubbing me right and left. Why? Because of you!"

"I have said nothing," she cried. "I have borne my misery silently, God knows."

"There are ways and means of letting people think things. You steal about this place like a ghost, keep your own rooms, absent yourself from your proper place, then wonder I am talked about!"

"It is your own doing."

"Oh, is it? I ordered Mrs. Ridgeton out of the house, did I?" He flung away her hand, with an oath. She walked quickly towards the door. He intercepted her.

"I suppose I ought to have ordered Lord Byron out of the house when he came to dinner just after his return? Of course, you have forgotten that. It was just a year after our marriage. Well, I let him come here to see you. Such a long

time ago, I suppose, that it has quite slipped your memory ! "

Forgotten it ! Every word was burning her through and through. Byron's eyes when he had looked at the little one, the mute look of agonized appeal to her for one word of tenderness, the farce of sitting there, all three, at dinner, trying to appear natural. The contrast between the loud, vulgar man she had married and the glorious beauty of the " Lame Schoolboy," now grown to wonderful manhood.

But it was the recollection of that hour that gave Mary Musters the courage to face her husband now, as she stood looking at him in proud disdain. It was the nearer memory of one sunset hour on the rose-covered terrace she loved so well, when the doors of paradise had opened for one brief instant ; closed by the hands of convention by the mother who loved the name of Chaworth better than her daughter's happiness ; by this creature who had lured her back only to heap fresh outrage upon her now. For a second, Musters quailed before the look in her great, dark eyes as she spoke.

" I came back here, John, at your request. I am the mistress of Colwick Hall. I demand, at least, my position. That woman leaves the house ! I refuse to meet her ! "

He knew she had right on her side there. The scene downstairs had shown him where common opinion lay. The only way was to trap her, throw the blame of any scandal on his wife. His little, petty world of county Squireship meant something to him. The Musters had always been something until now.

" You make your demands, I mine," said he, hoarse with anger. " You want your position ; you shall have it. Come down and receive my guests, give me a little more of your charming company, my dear. If you want your wifely privileges you have only to ask for them."

His tone sent the blood to her face again, and as he advanced towards her, she drew back.

" Keep away from me ! " she cried. He took her hand and drew her towards him.

" So you really do care for me, after all ! " he said. " Why are you so afraid when I come near you, anyway ? It's your own fault if I go after other women, you know that ! "

He suddenly seized her in his arms and tried to kiss her. She gave a cry and endeavoured to push him away. He laughed and released her. She was shivering from head to foot.

" You never cared a curse for me ! " he said, in a low tone. " You know it, I know it as well. All right, leave well alone. Otherwise you may get an unpleasant surprise. I won't spare you if you do ever leave me for another man. You shall face it all. I warn you that much. A man's affairs are one thing, a woman's another."

She turned away with a cry of despair. The same words had been said to her that day.

" You can take your choice. Stay here and just keep up appearances. That is all I ask. You can have your friends, I have mine. But you will receive mine from to-day. Mark that ! To-morrow morning we are going for a drive together. And Mrs. Ridgeton is to be one of the party. If she's seen with you it may make a difference and put it right for to-day. I am quite content to leave matters as they are. You've got the child, and of course there are always plenty of females ready to come along and console you. Who was here to-day ? Oh, it doesn't matter. But any talk of divorce, my dear, won't be on your side. And if it should ever come to that, you can say good-bye to your daughter. The father has the sole care in any case of that kind, so don't be a fool. All you have to do is to come a nice little friendly drive to-morrow morning, and if in the meantime you like to speak to Ridgeton and tell her you're sorry you hurt her feelings, why, things can go on smoothly enough."

" I . . . apologize to that creature ? "

" By God, you'll do as I say ! It isn't the first time you have tried this game. It's going to be the last ! "

Mary Musters stood looking across the garden. The tears were blinding her. She heard Mrs. Becker's monotonous reiteration of " the duty of a wife." It was to be always the same. Day after day she must live this existence. For what ? For others.

" Do you hear what I'm saying ? " cried Musters, furiously.

The same rhythmic refrain : " The consolation of having endured to the end." " People are talking." She gave a great start as she felt her husband's grip on her shoulder.

" No more whining ! Just remember you're my wife and do as I advise you. Things will go on nicely so long as you don't rouse my temper."

The walls were closing in round her like a cell. She was in prison. This was to be the daily lot. She felt stifled, chained.

" Why don't you speak ? Sulking, I suppose. All right, you can have the rest of the day to do that as much as you please. After then. . . ."

She heard the door slam and knew she was alone. What was it that suddenly surged over her like a flood ? Wild revolt rose up and took possession of her in that instant. She rushed to the door, locked it, and walked up and down in great excitement. The room was lighter now. She flung out her arms and clasped them to her breast. Until to-day she had mourned, longed, suffered. Left to herself she might have gone on schooling herself to bear her burden. But the visit of Mrs. Becker had shown her what was expected. There was to be no respite, no sympathy for her. And underlying the rebellion, her wild resentment at Musters' cruelty, lay the truth. She no longer shrank from it. His words were all the worse because some foundation lay behind them. He knew how to make her wince when he sneered at his offering of " wifely rights." She no longer wished for them. His touch was loathsome to her. She dreaded the sound of his voice, the approach of his step. Not because of his brutality, but for the reason that she loved Byron. How much Musters knew or guessed he had kept to himself until to-day, but he held the whip over her now. She must either stay and face the daily ignominy of receiving his friends and mistresses, or release herself.

" Freedom, freedom at all costs," she cried aloud. Then rang the bell with nervous energy and went to her dressing-table. She had no plans, but one thought recurred again and again. Go back to Annesley Hall.

A knock at the door. She opened it. Her maid Susan stood there.

" Come in quickly, Susan." The woman obeyed. " Can you find out for me if Mr. Musters is still at home ? Do not ask anyone. I want to know, that's all."

" The master's going out quite soon, I think, ma'am. He was in the hall with the—the lady when I came up. They were both dressed for riding."

Mary looked at her apprehensively. Should she trust her ? Were there any of Musters' servants who would befriend her ? She hesitated.

" Oh, ma'am, it's too bad ! Pardon the liberty, but why should the master put on you like this ? " cried the woman impulsively.

"Listen, don't say any more. I want you to go down to Newton when Mr. Musters has really gone; ask him to have the carriage brought round for me as quickly as possible. Then come back and help me to dress. Not a word to any of the other servants."

"You won't let the likes of her drive you away?" said Susan. "Oh, ma'am, don't do it!"

"Order the carriage. I am returning home at once."

The maid hurried away. Mary went to her wardrobe, hastily selected some dresses, took out her boxes of trinkets, letters and necessaries. All she could think of was Annesley. It was calling her. What she could do when she reached the Hall she neither knew nor cared. The place was practically closed except for the caretaker and a couple of servants. But the vision of the terrace rose up before her eyes. It was there she and Byron had parted. The heartbreak of that hour had made her long to forget it; now she thought of nothing else. The roses would be in full bloom. She would be at peace to think, to live with memories, at least. No more entered her mind.

Susan returned and the two fell to packing up the immediate essentials for her flight. The clock struck four. They heard Musters' voice outside, the sound of laughing and talking. Mary went to the window and watched them ride away.

"Susan, now! Go down to Newton at once."

When it was known that Mrs. Musters required the carriage, tongues were loosened in the servants' hall, but every one was willing to lend a hand. His treatment of their gentle mistress had aroused their goodwill long ago. If they had dared they would have assembled on the steps to bid her God speed. Susan begged to accompany her, and the offer was gratefully accepted. How good everyone seemed! The cordial "Good-bye, ma'am" from the friendly Newton sounded like music in her ears as she sank back on the seat and closed her eyes.

"Look, ma'am, Diadem Hill! Don't it gladden your eyes to see it again?"

Mary started guiltily. What did the woman mean? But Susan was gazing at the tall trees now beginning to redden in the setting sun.

"Ain't they just a picture, ma'am?"

Mary bowed her head in silence, and the great tears rolled down her cheeks. The maid glanced at her in sympathy, but,

fearing she would only upset her by speaking, maintained a discreet silence for the rest of the journey.

It was soon accomplished. Half an hour later she stood on the terrace and looked across her own grounds. Susan went upstairs to make preparations for the night.

" Won't you have something to eat ? " she had urged Mary on their arrival.

" Presently ; in my own room. Leave me alone for awhile."

She stood among a bower of roses and drank in their fragrance with a sigh of deep content. Then looked up at the sky. On one hand the great ball of red fire slowly sinking, and the glory of a dome flaming with rose, purple, and queer clouds flecked with a myriad hues ; to her right the pale moon just visible, a silver halo round her. It was like a foretaste of heaven to the soul of Mary Chaworth-Musters. A deep rapture filled her heart, all the pain, the fear of the day had vanished. Her breath came and went rapidly. The latent poetry in her awoke once more. She could have broken into song.

" Oh God ! I thank thee for calling me back again. Show me a way ! "

" Mary, my beloved ! I would come to you from the ends of the earth ! "

She started. It was Byron's voice she heard. She looked round. It was fancy, of course. Yet how clear the words had sounded.

" Is he coming ? Is he coming ? " she cried ; then turned and went swiftly into the house.

The portrait of William Chaworth, crimsoned by the last rays of the sunset, looked down on her with the old inscrutable smile.

CHAPTER FOUR

THERE came a day when Byron received a letter. Just a friendly, casual letter; nothing to occasion a change of plans. Yet, within a few days of its arrival, Byron found London unbearably irritating, and decided to visit his ancestral Abbey for a week or two.

Having arrived, and spent some long, lazy hours lying on the shore of the lake, and playing with the dogs, all the while deep in thought, yet imagining he was not thinking at all, he looked himself in the face and spoke the truth.

He had battled with a desire to see Mary Chaworth-Musters ever since she had written that charming, friendly letter.

Byron battled for two days longer and, finally, called upon her. She was apparently pleased to see him, but had a nervous, timid air, that distressed him greatly.

"Come, sit here, and tell me everything," said he.

"Everything?" she repeated. "It would take too long."

"Have you been unhappy and never told me?"

"I did not think you wished to hear from me. It has been very difficult."

"What happened?" Byron gazed his full at her and was content.

"Well, my husband became quite impossible for the time. He made Colwick Hall unfit for me to live in, with his drunken men and vulgar women friends and, when in drink, he treated me with harshness and cruelty. It was unbearable. I decided to stay here for a time."

"But, surely, you will never go back to him now?" said Byron, horrified.

She turned that strange, surprised look upon him that had often set his blood tingling.

"There has been no suggestion of my not doing so, if he should mend his ways. He is my husband, after all."

Byron made an exclamation of impatience.

"Mary, for the love of God, awake!" he cried. "You

never show me your soul. You hide yourself. You do not feel this truthfully. Be frank with me."

She twisted her handkerchief in her hands with a strained, tearful countenance.

"It's all so difficult," she burst out at last. "I cannot speak. It hurts me too much. I married of my own free will. I must bear my burden. No one can lighten it for me. It is wonderful to sit beside you once more and talk, as we used to do. Byron, you have always been a brother to me. I fear I have not appreciated your affection."

"Affection?" said he. "You know I love you, Mary. If you had not married Musters you would have been mine. You chose in haste."

"I was not mistress of myself. I loved him then. He is fast killing all regard. But what can I do? I am bound. I must make the best of my life. I may have other children. I must stand by my bond now that I have made it. But heaven knows I have suffered for my mistake these past few months."

"You own it was a mistake?"

She shook her head hopelessly.

"It is all so difficult to fathom," said she.

"My poor Mary!" said Byron, laying his hand on hers, his voice very tender.

His wild passion had subsided. He was all softness and sympathy, like a strong sister. There was an element of woman in him sometimes. He had the capacity for most delicate understanding. All his dominant force dropped from him as he endeavoured to help Mary to unburden her heart.

This proved successful. She told him everything, as one woman might tell another.

How her husband had, from the first, been hard to live with. How he went his own way and was intolerant of her weaknesses. How he made open house for his London friends, who were by no means quiet or dignified. How he exposed the child to these people, and kept her up at night, expecting Mary to preside day after day, night after night, over his house parties.

She wept a few tears, and allowed her head to rest on his shoulder, while he stroked the hair he adored.

After a time she recovered herself.

"I am so glad to see you, Byron. It is quite like old times when we were children."

"We're grown up now, Mary," said he. "I am glad I came. I have been trying to keep away from you."

"Why?" Her eyes were wide, red and surprised.

"You know why," said he.

"Please, Byron, do not make things more difficult than they are. Let me have the happiness of talking to you as I used to, before my marriage."

"Those days will never be quite the same for me."

"Or for me. Let us not remember them, then."

She was silent for a minute, and then spoke in a brighter tone.

"Byron," said she. "Will you come and stay, as you used to do, in your own room? It will be so delightful to resume our old friendship."

She spoke timidly, as though conscious of the fact that she was doing something wrong.

Byron's blood leaped in his veins. Down at the bottom of his soul he was, indeed, that young child Byron, who had feared the ghosts and talked of poetic dreams to the young Mary with no more than an innocent, ideal love.

He was just the same. With a thrill of intense happiness he discovered that he had not changed, that the old joy of coming to the Hall as a guest was just as fresh and exciting as ever. He forgot that years had passed and that differences in thought and life had occurred.

"I should be so happy to come, Mary. Tell me when I may come."

"To-morrow," said she, and her eyes possessed their old sparkle.

So it happened that Byron consented to stay at Annesley.

Storm clouds had gathered in the sky as he mounted his horse to ride back to Newstead.

The wind rose and thunder rolled in the distance.

Byron, a child of the elements, rode into the approaching storm with pleasure. He loved the rain on his face and the wind in his hair. He galloped to Newstead glowing with vigour and life. He went to his bedroom, on arrival, where Fletcher was laying out clothes.

"Terrible weather, my Lord," remarked the valet.

"Is it? I like it." Byron flung back the casement, and watched the trees blowing and bending towards the Abbey.

"Will you dine to-night, my Lord?" Fletcher asked.

" Dine, be damned ! leave me alone, and come in before you retire. I am not leaving my room again."

" Very well, my Lord." Fletcher withdrew, and Byron, closing the window after awhile, sat at his table, and wrote. Something had come back to him. He was as far away from London life as if it had never been. He thought of nothing but Mary. But he thought of her as having chosen him as confidant, as one she wished to have near her. He forgot even her husband, in the contemplation of his own content.

It was again a dream.

* * * * *

For several days the world seemed heaven to Byron. He went to Annesley every day, and walked on the terrace as usual.

One evening they were in the picture gallery, talking of the time when Byron used to fear the pictures would descend and follow him along the corridor.

" You were a foolish boy then," said she.

" I was terrified of them. Children are funny, are they not ? "

" Yes, I suppose they are. Yet, my grandfather's portrait has always frightened me, and does still."

Byron was silent at this. He had secret fears of William Chaworth, himself.

Rain commenced pattering against the windows as they stood in the gallery, and the night sky was black.

" Another storm is coming," said Mary. " I am so afraid of them. The lightning is so dangerous."

" I love the storm," said Byron.

" But it is more than life is worth to cross the woodlands in lightning. You will not go to Newstead to-night ? "

" I should not stay here, Mary. You have given me leave more than once, but I have never availed myself. I think it is better not."

He had, at first, welcomed the idea. But the old doubts and fears had made him refuse to stay at the Hall.

The storm gathered more and more, however, and Mary begged him to stay. It was raining tremendously, the ground was a river, and the wind was gusty, making a journey by road very dangerous. There was nothing for it but that Byron should stay.

He had feelings of every description when he shut the door

and stood within his old bedroom. He remembered so many childish little things that amused him.

It was a tearful business to realize that all this was dream happiness, that Mary was a married woman, with a sad life, and some, to Byron, strange bond, that made her willing to return at any moment, by command of her husband and parents, to misery.

The candles on his mantelpiece burnt steadily. He looked at them. There was one, also, on the table and, sitting on his bed, he watched the flame as it wavered in the draught from under the door. The storm was intermittent. Rain still fell sharply. Byron had undressed (there were always garments at hand for emergency guests at the Hall), and was sitting in his dressing-gown, staring at the candle. After awhile, he blew out the lights on the mantelpiece and lay down, with a half-stifled sigh. A vivid flash of lightning lit up the room, and the thunder began rolling, then crashing, and kept up an alarming bombardment. He awoke, and began to wonder if Mary was afraid. The candle was still burning on the table. He lay awake, looking at it, and as he did so his sensations were curious. A weird prickling crept over his entire body.

Just then a faint tap came at his door. He started, then rose, and flinging the door open, beheld Mary, pale, shrinking, in her soft long nightgown and hair streaming over her shoulders.

They stood for a moment and looked at each other.

Then she spoke.

"Why did you open the door?"

"You knocked."

"No, I did not. I did not knock. I don't know why I came. The storm frightens me. I should not have come to your room."

The thunder subsided. It was only a distant roll.

"Come in, Mary. Come here. I am glad you came to me."

She looked terrified.

He took her hand, and led her into the chamber.

"Byron, don't! I am afraid!" she whispered.

"I only want to protect you, Mary. Stay here until the storm has passed."

She sat down by the table, hugging herself.

"Oh, Byron! I should not have come. What would my mother say if she knew? She would tell John."

" Don't you trust me, Mary ? " he asked, keeping her hand in his.

" Yes, yes . . . I think I trust you, Byron. Yes, of course I do." Her frightened eyes were upturned to his face.

Then, that overwhelming sensation of desire swept over Byron. He, too, wished she had not come. It was cruel of her. It may have been done in fright, in all innocence, in a panic at the storm. But it may not. Queer thoughts entered his mind as from nowhere. They were certainly not of his own creation.

He suddenly took her in his arms and kissed her.

" Mary, you came to me because you know you are mine ! Have always been mine ! There is no reason why you should not be mine for ever."

She fought with him.

" Byron, my dear ! don't do this ! Have mercy on me ! "

His force slackened.

" Forgive me ! I cannot help it. Do you love me, Mary, or do you love Musters ? "

Mary threw back her hair and looked at him intensely.

" I . . . I love you ! " said she. " You, always. I never knew it. I dare not let myself believe it ! I am mad to say it now. I don't know what I am saying ! Oh, Byron ! let me go back to my room. Believe me, I love you, only you ! "

She clung to him awhile longer.

" I have had terrible struggles in my heart," she said. " I am torn between my duty and my impulse."

" What is your duty ? " he asked.

" My duty to my married name ; my child. I must not forget. I am still his wife ; still bound."

" You are not ; you are bound by nothing but your own heart. You love me, Mary ! You have confessed it. Every hour of my life has been passed thinking of you. All my falling from grace has been to forget you ; but you are with me always."

The eerie night, the receding thunder and the fainter flashes of lightning, made them both unreal. They felt that this was a dream ; that they were not really there.

The one candle was getting lower.

Mary disengaged herself and went quickly to the door.

" To-morrow, in the light, Byron ! " she whispered. " We'll talk. Let me go to my room ! "

A look of intense passion entered his face. He wanted to

turn the key. He struggled; he suffered. But his great, pure love for her conquered his hereditary devil.

He flung the door wide.

She flew down the corridor noiselessly and faded in the dark. Byron came back into the room and sat down on the bed, utterly exhausted and cold as ice.

Sitting perfectly still for some minutes, he again received the weird, prickling sensation he had experienced before Mary came. His conscious vision seemed to fade, and he saw nothing but the candle.

All at once the room changed. It was dark, except for the one light, but it did not feel like the same room.

Sounds of voices, far off, reached his ears. There was a confused sound of quarrelling. He could not catch the words, but he could hear his own name and that of Mary's maiden name, Chaworth, at intervals.

Then a queer sound, like the drawing of swords and one or two passes.

After this, an agonized groan and a heavy fall, followed by the rattle of a sword, fallen out of the owner's hand.

At this moment the candle blew out.

There was a long period of complete darkness.

Byron stirred. His head was giddy and his body powerless. He thought he was in bed and rolled over on his back. His hand struck something hard and he opened his eyes.

The first rays of the sun were streaming into his room.

He was lying on the floor near the table, and felt stiff and chilly. With great difficulty he rose and tottered weakly to the bed, where he lay down thankfully on the soft mattress.

It was very hard to say what had occurred during the night, but his thoughts ran continually on the fatal duel that had taken place in London between William Chaworth and his ancestor.

He hugged the bed-clothes round him, and lay, trembling. Then, the warm rays brought fresh life to him, and he fell asleep, to be awakened in the ordinary way, by a servant, later.

The sky was blue. All traces of the storm had gone.

He dressed, and went out on the terrace. Mary was there already, pale and tired-looking, but smiling.

"What a terrible night!" said she. "I hope the storm did not keep you awake too long?"

He was puzzled.

" And you ? " he asked.

" I was afraid. But then, I am always afraid."

" I dreamt you came to me in fear, Mary," said he, searching her eyes with his own.

" How strange ! So did I ! Our dreams must have met ! It was a terrible dream. I awoke, startled. I must not dream such things again ; it is not right."

" Is it past now ; do you feel it is past ? " said Byron.

" Oh, yes. Quite past. Dreams do not remain. I had a letter from Colwick early this morning. I am going back to-day."

" Going back ? " cried Byron. " You will surely never go back ? "

" Oh, yes, I must. My husband commands it. Beside, my mother would never forgive me if I disobeyed my husband's word. It is the woman's fate. My child's future must be thought of, and I did wrong to leave my husband's roof."

She spoke placidly. There was no emotion, no life, no will.

Byron shuddered. He felt that he must get away. He was desperate.

" Byron," said Mary. " We must always be friends. But, you understand, I must obey my husband and my family ? "

His face went rigid.

" Very well, Mary. We shall not meet again," said he.

She clung to his hand.

" Don't say that ! Don't say that ! " she cried.

" Not unless you, yourself, wish to see me. Remember, I always have and always shall love you more than life. One call from you and I would be at your feet. You have only to write one word, ' Come,' and nothing would keep me from you. Remember that."

" I have my fate to follow, Byron. I must never write that word ! " said Mary.

" No, it would be far better if you never did."

" You must forget me."

He twisted his fingers together.

" I'll do whatever you ask, if it is possible. But I think that is not possible."

He left her standing on the terrace.

He never knew if she had visited his room or not, and she never confessed her full dream.

It was as though the night had been magic and vanished into air.

CHAPTER FIVE

DURING the months following Society found the season extremely interesting. So did Lord Byron, for what was the conquest of "Childe Harold" compared to the capture of fluttering hearts?

So thought John Cam Hobhouse as he noted that Byron was now, apparently, following his advice, and flirting with the butterflies that hovered round the idol of the hour. Women—married, single, young and middle-aged—became possessed of a fever. Apollo found himself ardently pursued by innumerable Daphnes. So far, so good. There was safety in numbers. It would help his friend to cure that old heartache that so often threatened to disturb his peace of mind, wreck his hopes just when the tide of fortune had turned in his favour.

But when Hobhouse had his attention called to a paragraph in the paper that palpably hinted at the very great interest taken in a "certain young poet" by the delightful wife of a great politician, and the suspicious blindness of the statesman in question, who was so remarkable for his astuteness in the House, it set him thinking.

It could only be a reference to Lady Caroline Lamb. Her infatuation was rapidly making Byron an object of ridicule. A visit from the young lady's mother that day confirmed his suspicions. He promptly betook himself to St. James' Street.

His Lordship was seated in his study reading over some letters. It was then four o'clock. He was still in his dressing-gown, looking very tired. A large parcel of manuscript lay on his desk.

"Hullo! Hobby. How are you?" Hobhouse smiled and shook hands.

"Very well, and very busy. I see you are, also." He glanced approvingly at the work. Byron laughed.

"Oh, that? I haven't touched it for days. I consider I have earned a rest."

" That sounds like resting on your laurels. That is not a wise plan. The public are waiting for more."

" Let them," was the laconic response. He went on reading his letter.

" What a number you have there ! I suppose they are too personal, otherwise, if I could help . . ."

Byron rose, took up a pile, and going over to the sofa, sat down, and tossed them to him.

" My dear Hobby, you don't think I'm going to refuse an offer like that ? You can answer some if you like."

" Bills ? " Hobhouse opened them and frowned.

" This looks rather worrying," he observed.

" Not in the least. Rochdale will pay those."

" What a blessing you won that case."

" Yes. It was a near thing, Hobby. Hanson has been working for over seven years trying to get it settled. Another debt of gratitude I owe William Byron for selling my estate without any legal right to do so."

" What a terrible man he was ! " remarked Hobhouse.

He had scarcely uttered the words before he regretted it. Byron looked at him with an expression of fear. Then he gave a dry, mirthless laugh.

" Say he is, not was," said he.

" What on earth do you mean ? "

" Nothing, only he is very much alive at times, I assure you."

A dangerous chord had been touched, and Hobhouse looked at him with apprehension.

" Byron, you are not superstitious, surely ? " he asked.

" Yes. Aren't you ? "

His blue eyes looked searchingly at the other as if seeking to satisfy some private query of his own.

Hobhouse smiled.

" I never allow myself to be disturbed by unreality, and I propose that we get back to the business, my dear Byron. These accounts . . ."

" Oh, damn the accounts ! Take them home with you. I don't want to bother about them now." He rose, went over to the desk, and took up a letter which he held out.

" Now, before you read this, I'll have a wager with you."

" Done ! " said Hobhouse. " What is it ? "

" Come, and spend a night at Newstead Abbey with me, and sit up in my room."

"What for?"

Byron looked at him quizzically.

"You won't allow the dead could come to life. I can prove they do."

"My dear Byron, by the time we arrived there, and prepared to test the fact, you would be the first to draw back. Besides, I'm not interested in that sort of thing."

"I am; only I'm a little afraid of it. If it's true, really true, what possibilities it seems to hold out."

"Not very pleasant ones to judge by the way you are speaking," answered Hobhouse. "You're getting morbid, my friend."

"No; but as Hamlet says, 'I have bad dreams,' that's all." His tone became light again.

"What about that letter? Shall I answer it?" asked Hobby.

"This? Oh, no. It's from my little page, Rushton. Only I thought there was something in it that might interest you. He mentions that poor old Joe Murry was scared almost to death last week by the sound of someone shuffling about in a room that has been closed for years. He swears it's the 'Wicked Lord,' as he calls my respectable ancestor."

"Oh, was that what you meant?" said Hobhouse.

"No, something quite different. Let's talk of something else," was the unexpected reply.

It was evidently the best thing to do. Byron had queer moments at times. He often looked haunted, and spoke as if he thought he was. Hobhouse, only too glad to change the topic into which the conversation had drifted, took out the morning paper from his pocket, and opened it.

"What have you got there, Hobby? *The Times*?"

"Yes, there is a paragraph I thought you ought to see, Byron. I really think something must be done to stop this sort of thing."

"Oh, I expect it is another notice of that book some good soul has written to prove I am an atheist," said Byron, good-humouredly. "I told Murray to publish it, but the idiot refused. From all I hear, it is written very well."

"You're a queer fellow, Byron. No, it is not that, and I fear it will do you a great deal of harm. More than any attack on your religion."

"What is my religion, Hobby? Can you tell me? I've been trying to find out for years!"

Hobhouse refused to be put off. He pointed to the offending notice, and proceeded to read it aloud.

"Well?" said Byron, when he had concluded.

"Don't you realize the danger of that sort of advertisement?"

"It is interesting," answered Byron.

"Look here," said Hobhouse. "If this comes to Sir William Lamb's notice there will be the devil to pay. Lady Bessborough called on me to-day. She actually asked me if you would consent to leave town. She says your intrigue, to put it plainly, with Caroline must end. She swears you are breaking the girl's heart and undermining her health. Of course, you are blamed. I spoke my mind pretty freely."

"It has ended, months ago. The whole thing, as far as I'm concerned. There was never much in it, anyway. I liked her, at first; but Caroline is impossible. Do you think I want to be pursued in ball-rooms, or have her waiting at the street corner for me, and making a fool of herself into the bargain? Besides, for Lady Melbourne's sake, it ought to end. Look here."

He went back to his desk, and took out a bundle of letters.

"Over forty in three weeks. I haven't answered one. What else can I do? As to being driven out of London by her or her mother. No! Why don't they take her away to Ireland?"

"I agree entirely."

Byron limped across the room, and sat down at his desk with his back to Hobhouse. It was in the latter's mind to propose a trip abroad. What with one thing and another the work seemed at a standstill. Bad news from Nottingham, weeks ago, trouble in London with this exotic woman, late hours and loneliness into the bargain. He saw signs of restlessness in Byron's manner. The aimless talk, the nervous fingers ever playing with letters or drumming on the desk, the general air of having nothing to do in particular. All bad, very bad, decided the Practical One.

"Byron! What do you say to a trip with me abroad? The season is nearly over. Would you like it?"

Byron's eyes sparkled with delight.

"Hobby, my good fellow, that's the most sensible thing you've suggested for months."

"I thought a second visit to Greece might be good for you."

"Hobby, my friend, that's splendid."

"By the way," Hobhouse went on. "Whom do you think I met at Holland House this week? Lord Elgin. You should have seen his face when Lady Holland introduced me as a friend of yours."

"He should have seen those poor Greek workmen when they cried as they assisted to obey his damned orders!" said Byron with a look of intense anger. "Great God! what vandalism! It's been going on too long. These British aristocrats, God save the mark, in their blatant pride and ignorance, dare to insult the foreign countries they presume to visit, and try to lay their hands on the glorious monuments of ages. Then, come home as Elgin did, to prate of the great research work they have done, the wonderful benefits to History and Literature. It's money they want. They've only one thought in their puny minds—Greed. That was all Elgin wanted."

Whenever this subject was mentioned Byron blazed out in fury. Hobhouse inwardly marvelled at the passion that always possessed him when anything touching Greece was involved. His love for this land was in every fibre of his being. His genius rose highest when he wrote of her, and at times his resemblance to the ancient Heroes of her mythology was so striking that he might have been the reincarnation of a Greek God.

The event that stirred his wrath so much was the spoliation of the glorious marbles, brought from Greece by Lord Elgin under pretext of preserving them from the Turks. A fierce controversy had raged round his action. To be sure, he posed as a literary and artistic connoisseur, but in view of the facts that he had actually sold them to the Nation at an enormous sum, he met his true judgement at the hands of Byron, who had written a magnificent attack on him, "The Curse of Minerva." From that moment Elgin stood revealed to the world as a mercenary plunderer. In their travels abroad, Hobhouse and Byron had seen his agents at work.

"You have a great gift, Byron," said Hobhouse, proudly. "What other poet could have brought the despicable man into the public eye, and shown him as he really was? Your verses have put an end to all future attempts of that kind. By Jove, I envy you your power! I wish I had it myself."

"The crowning shame of all was the stealing of that glorious frieze from the Parthenon. 'His property,' he dared to call it. I wish the *Mentor* had gone down to the

bottom of the sea with him and the marbles, on their journey home ! "

" It very nearly did. But shipwreck and all the disasters that dogged his return did him little harm compared to the contempt your verses brought on his head. All the same, Byron, don't make too many enemies if you can avoid it. Lord Holland told me that if ever the Press get a chance to ruin you they will take it with both hands. And from what I saw of Elgin, he might not be above helping them."

Byron laughed.

" Enemies are the spur to me. I do my best work fighting."

" That's in you and your race. A splendid spirit, but human nature sometimes takes a pleasure in dragging down those who have soared up to heights they cannot reach."

" Would you have me write down to that level ? " said Byron in disgust. " Hold back my thoughts for fear they bring me some personal harm ? Hobby, as long as I live I intend to have freedom in that direction if no other. I've been chained in many ways. But no man shall stay me there. I write what I feel, what I think ; and let the Devil take care of the rest."

" I must go now," said Hobhouse. " But how about this paper ? Ought we to take any step ? "

" How can I ? I've told Lady Melbourne to get the little fool away, off to Ireland, anywhere. I have not answered her letters. I never meet her, if I can avoid it. What on earth can I do more ? "

Hobhouse shook his head.

" Nothing, as far as I can see. Well, we must hope that Lady Caroline will come to her senses one of these days."

" The sooner the better, for herself. It doesn't affect me now," said Byron, scornfully. " I refuse to be chased out of London or anywhere else, for her pranks."

" What are you doing to-night ? " asked Hobhouse, at parting.

" Oh, I don't know. Read or write or go out."

" You are due at Holland House, I believe."

" Well, call for me. If I'm not too lazy to dress, we'll go together."

Left alone, Byron went to his desk, took out the letters that Caroline had sent him, looked at them, and then said :

" Shall I burn them ? "

The thought that they might, one day, prove a source of

embarrassment to her and fresh worry to him, flashed across his mind.

"No; on second thought, not yet. It might be best to return them, and have an interview for the last time."

So he replaced them; and sitting down with a book soon lost all thought of his persistent admirer.

At this precise hour, a council of war was being held at Melbourne House.

Lord Melbourne stood in the library looking down in stern displeasure on the fair lady in question, the paper in his hand. Lady Melbourne and Caroline's mother were seated together on the sofa regarding the culprit with anxious gaze.

Caroline stood before him, the very picture of a frail irresponsible creature, clasping her little hands on her breast, and looking up into his face with a frightened air. Her slim figure, exquisitely attired in a pale blue satin gown, dressed with the simplicity of a child, and behaving now as one brought to book for some offence of which she was unconscious or wholly innocent. Such a baby face, with large eyes shaded by long lashes, and her head crowned with a mass of short, fair curls. Elfin, Squirrel—these were some of the pet names her friends bestowed on her.

Lord Melbourne looked on her severely, and held the offending paper towards her.

"Once and for all, Caroline, understand most clearly that I refuse to allow anyone to bring scandal or disgrace on our name. If your husband is blind, more's the pity. If he condones such conduct he earns the contempt of every right-thinking person."

"William has never condoned anything!" said Lady Melbourne, rising in anger.

"Be silent, Elizabeth. Kindly tell me what you have to say about this sort of thing," he added, to his daughter-in-law.

"Please remember that my poor child is very overwrought, and don't speak to her so harshly," pleaded Lady Bessborough, pathetically.

"Overwrought fiddlesticks! She's not too highly strung to play fast and loose with her own name, and make herself a byword by her infatuation for Lord Byron. Here, madam, under the very roof that holds her husband and children! She's not too nervous, as you express it, to wait for him in the street, and make you ridiculous. She brings public notice on us all in a way that will ruin our prestige! You, Elizabeth,

apparently have no influence with William. He has none over her. And so it goes on until we have the papers actually sneering at us all. It is intolerable."

Lady Melbourne looked despairingly at her husband. The good lady had her own difficulties. She knew that Lord Melbourne looked on their sweet, gentle-natured son with contempt and despised his butterfly wife. She also knew that it was her responsibility, for she had thrown open the doors of Melbourne House to Byron.

He had soon won her motherly heart and the two were very great friends. Caroline's mad folly was endangering that tie, for Byron had written that he would never enter the house again until Caroline had been sent away or promised to behave in a sensible manner. She also knew that Lord Melbourne was right. No scandal should be allowed under her roof. Her position as one of the leading society hostesses of the day demanded that all such folly should be put an end to without delay.

"Caroline, you are a fool!" she said, brusquely. "And realize, if you can, that Lord Byron has no desire to see you or speak to you again. That one of these days he will no doubt be getting married. Don't make a fool of yourself any longer."

There was no reply.

"It would be a very good thing if that happened, Elizabeth, a very good thing, indeed," said her husband.

Caroline flashed a rebellious look at her mother-in-law.

"He will never marry," she said, in a high, shrill voice, trembling with agitation. "He loves me, and me alone. He has told me so, often."

"He's a poet and you're an idiot!" was Lord Melbourne's solution.

"Let me tell you," he continued, "that he admired Isabella very much indeed, and her reserve and charming, quiet behaviour, when she was introduced to him at Lady Westmorland's, impressed him exceedingly."

"Isabella, indeed!"

"Why not Isabella?" asked Lord Melbourne, angrily. "She is quite eligible, as you know. She is not married, you are. What is the world coming to, I wonder, when you dare to stand there and prate of your love for Lord Byron or anyone else? You are my son's wife, Madam, and the mother of his children. If you forget that fact, others

remember it, and it is time you dropped this absurd folly, and remembered whose name you bear."

"Caroline, my dear," said her mother, going to her. "Do wrestle with your feelings a little more. Make an effort, for my sake."

Lady Bessborough became very emotional. In an instant the childish face hardened. Pushing her mother away, she broke out in furious rage:

"It's not true! Byron to marry Isabella, that piece of cold prudery? I'll never believe it. He loves me better than the whole world. Oh, I know what you all want to do; you want to part us. Where is he? I'll go to him at once!"

It was a truly remarkable sight to see the extraordinary change that came over Caroline as she panted out these words. She was trembling in every limb and white with anger. She turned and rushed to the door, but Lord Melbourne, stepping forward quickly, caught her wrist, and held her.

"Let me go! Let me go!" she struggled with all her might. He calmly swung her round and held her firmly.

"Sit down and control yourself."

She stood, motionless.

"Sit down, at once!"

He looked searchingly into her face. She dropped her eyes and suddenly collapsed in his arms, weeping and crying out that they were killing her. He led her to the nearest chair, and placed her in it, motioning to the other ladies to stand back.

"The girl is mad, I do believe!" ejaculated Lady Melbourne.

"That's better," said Melbourne, sternly. "No wild hysterics please. We have had too many scenes in this house on your account. I'll have no more of them."

Caroline looked up with her eyes streaming. Her lip quivered, but no words came. The effect of this was to make Lord Melbourne feel a brute. Here was he, lecturing a little trembling thing that obviously needed petting and care. Her mother evidently felt this, and rushed to Caroline, throwing her arms around her.

"I can't endure it! You are making her ill! Look at her, and then ask whose fault this is."

"Not Byron's, anyway," broke in Lady Melbourne. "And if she chooses to make herself an object of utter contempt to

Society in general, she has only herself to blame if it reacts on her nerves."

She crossed over to the group.

" Go upstairs, my dear, and put your babies to bed. Behave like a woman of twenty-seven, not a girl of seventeen."

Lord Melbourne interposed.

" My dear Caroline, the best thing for you will be, as your mother suggests, to go away to Ireland and stay there. Yes, as long as you wish," he added, pointedly. " For I assure you that any more of these paragraphs will end in your having to seek another home altogether."

Lady Bessborough gave a cry.

" Yes," he added, severely. " Any divorce proceedings that may occur will not take place with you under this roof." He turned to his wife, angrily : " Is William going to play the complacent husband much longer ? "

Lady Melbourne flushed. She knew, well enough, that the rift between father and son was growing wider each day. Lord Melbourne had never cared much for his younger son. All his affection had been lavished on the elder, poor Peniston, whose death had changed him. The splendid qualities of William Lamb found no recognition from his father. His chivalrous affection and reverence for the brainless little creature he had made his wife, was an enigma to Lord Melbourne. Caroline, in his eyes, was a disaster, a blot on the family name and dignity.

Time and again he had spoken strongly of her follies, and urged Sir William to free himself. Her wild passion for the Society Idol seemed the last straw. Others had spoken of the quiet, reserved husband. Scandals were repeated to him. He silenced them all with one flash of his fine eyes, one reply— " Why don't you leave it alone ? " No one could tell how much or how little he knew. Even his mother could not have told if he trusted Caroline or forgave her.

She laid her hand on Lord Melbourne's arm.

" She must go away ! Then everything will settle down again. I have spoken to William ; he agrees."

Lord Melbourne bowed his head.

" Very good. I say no more for the present. And so, my dear Caroline, when you have conquered this most unpardonable infatuation for one whose only desire is, I believe, to forget you, I shall be the first to welcome you home."

Her apparent helplessness moved him in spite of himself. What the fascination is that helpless women exercise over strong men will never be known. But even Lord Melbourne's sternness melted a little at the sight of that pitiable figure crouched up in the chair, looking up at him with a miserable expression of appeal.

"Well?" said her father-in-law, quietly. She muttered something about dying; her love was killing her; she would never come back alive. Then she enlivened the proceedings by going into violent hysterics.

"For goodness sake get her some tea or something. Only don't let the servants see her in this state," cried Lord Melbourne, in utter exasperation.

Lady Melbourne nodded and hurried away.

The distracted Caroline started up.

"I won't stay here to be persecuted. You'll send me mad. I shall go to Byron. He will take me away from you all! We'll fly abroad together!"

"Oh! fly, and be damned!" said Lord Melbourne, and, his patience exhausted, he turned on his heel, and left the room in high dudgeon.

"Caroline, you'll ruin us all," wailed her poor mother. "Your husband will divorce you, and then what shall we do? What is to become of you? Where are you going?"

"To Byron! Tell them all! Let the world know! What do I care?" cried Caroline.

Lady Bessborough tried to stay her, but was thrust on one side. Hatless and breathless Caroline gained the door, and flew down the stairs. In another moment the loud slam of the street door was heard.

"Good heavens! What upon earth has happened?" cried Lady Melbourne, returning with a small tray. The unhappy Lady Bessborough collapsed on the couch, and, lifting up her voice, like Rachel, wept for her child.

"She's gone—gone to Byron! Elizabeth, what shall we do? She'll be at his rooms, at this hour! Look at the time!"

The clock was then striking eleven. Lady Melbourne heaved a deep sigh. She carried the tray across to the distracted mother, and put it on a small table, then sat down beside her.

"What's to be done?"

" Done ? " echoed the practical lady. " Drink this tea, my dear Susan, and get your bonnet and shawl. I'll order the carriage, and we'll follow the little lunatic, and bring her home. Byron won't want her. That I do know ! "

Saying which, she bestirred herself to action, and left Lady Bessborough sitting with the tears dropping off her nose into a cup of excellent tea.

CHAPTER SIX

Lady Caroline Lamb, the most incomprehensible woman of her day, dashed down the stairs of Melbourne House and out into the street, hailed a hackney coach, flung herself into it, panting and triumphant, after commanding the driver to take her to " Lord Byron's house, 8, St. James' Street, at once."

The order was given at the top of her voice. To her chagrin, it seemed to make no impression on the man, or, for that matter, anyone else. The hour was late, and the passers-by, few. Moreover, her ladyship's words were poured out so incoherently, that no one half a yard away could have heard a word.

The coach drove on, and she lay back in it, wild with excitement. The very thing she had hoped for so long had come to pass. At last ; she had been driven, literally driven, from her home by the cruelty of her relations. Clearly, her only course was to cast herself into Byron's arms and claim his protection. He must take her away !

She planned it all out. There was nothing tearful or timid now about the bright animated face and sparkling eyes that glowed with delight. "Oh, why didn't the horses take wings and fly ? " How slow they were ! She knocked impatiently at the window. Made a wild gesture to the driver, who nodded. Then he slowly brought his horses to a standstill, dismounted from his seat, and came to the door. She thrust her head out, and gasped.

" Faster ! Faster, man ! Life and death are at stake ! Oh, don't stand there gaping at me. Whip up your horses, and get me to Lord Byron's house at once."

He cocked one ear, looked at her doubtfully, scratched his head, and drawled out :

" What do you say, Lady ? "

" Great heavens ! Are you mad, blind or deaf ! Go on, I say ! " she panted out, waving her hands towards the street.

" Eh ! Go on ! Well, wasn't I agoing on ? " he retorted.

" Yes ! But so slowly, man. Hurry ! Hurry ! "

" I was a hurrying all I could," he answered ; " then you go abattering at the winder, afrighting the life out of the mare, and making her jib. She ain't used to it."

Caroline went livid with rage.

" Fool ! Dotard ! Idiot ! " she shouted at him, and jumped out of the coach to look for another. Unfortunately, she had caused him to pull up in a side street. There was nothing else in sight.

" There, now ! " ejaculated the man, addressing his mare, " if she doan't want to push the blessed thing along, I do believe ! "

Caroline fumed with anger, and stamped her foot at him.

" Why didn't you make the horse go faster, then ! Oh, I see, you've only got one. I thought you had two in the coach." She looked around as if to discover where the other steed had vanished to, in the meanwhile.

" Can't be done, Lady," drawled the driver. " I've one 'orse, and she's worth her weight in gold. Been working the best part of the day, she 'as. I ain't agoing to make her kill herself."

He reached out for his whip, and drew the reins as if to pursue his way. Caroline darted forward with a wild cry.

" Man, you can have all the money you want ! " she cried dramatically. " Only get me to Lord Byron's house. Now ! Now ! You know him, of course ? "

" Can't say as I do."

" His house, then ! " cried Caroline, desperately. " You must know his house ! 8, St. James' Street. There's a clock at the end of the place. How far are we now ? "

" Lord knows," muttered the man, irritably. He was an old coachman, used to driving gentlemen as knew what was what, he told himself. Women is always a nuisance. He had half a mind to give up the job. Caroline's emotions did not appeal to his slow intelligence.

" You shouldn't a stopped me," he said.

" What else could I do ? You were crawling along. You're not fit to have a coach. Why don't you get a proper horse, not a thing like that ? "

That settled it. He turned on her, and treated her to a most expressive and fiery dissertation on the merits of his slandered mare.

" He could stand most things, that he could, but when it came to insulting ' Sainted Jane,' why, that finished it,

Hadn't she taken the Edinburgh Mail? Wasn't she the werry identical mare that Lord Onslow druve in 'The Age Coach.' Hadn't his Lordship handled the ribbons hisself, and said she was a clipper? What did the lady want? A four in hand! Let her git one and welcome! He wasn't agoing to kill the best horse he'd ever had for her whims and fancies! No, not if she paid him ten times the fare. Good night to you, marm."

With that he swung himself back in his seat and was out of sight before Caroline had recovered from her astonishment. A clock near by struck twelve. She ran up and down the street. Then found her way back to the main road at last, her enthusiasm ebbing away, and her one desire to reach Byron before her mother or aunt could get to him first. At last, to her relief, another hackney coach came in view. She meekly implored him to take her to her destination, and refrained from any more theatrical displays this time. The horse ambled along comfortably. Caroline could have shrieked aloud, but she merely drummed her fingers on the arms of her seat. At last, the driver pulled up outside 8, St. James' Street. He looked up at the darkened windows.

"All your people gorne to bed, marm, I think," he said. She threw him some money, and alighting, ran to the door and pulled the bell violently. The driver lingered near. If the door was not opened, the lady might require his services again. More ringing. Still no signs of life.

"Shall I give a pull for you, Lady?" he asked, obligingly.

"Oh, go away, can't you?" cried Caroline, furiously. She wished to have no conveyance near by. Come what might, she had resolved to pass the night in Byron's room.

"There's no one a'coming, marm," said the driver after a pause.

"Get away," she cried; "out of my sight, do you hear? Haven't I given you enough money? What are you waiting for?"

"Oh, all right, keep a civil tongue in your head," muttered the man, and taking her at her word, got up on his box, and drove away. Caroline continued ringing and gave little cries of distress, but for some considerable time no one replied.

At last she heard the sound of steps. A pause, and then a little quavering voice called out:

"Who is there?"

" It is I, Lady Caroline Lamb. Is Lord Byron in ? Oh, open the door, do ! I must see him at once."

" What did you say ? Who is it ? "

" Open the door, whoever you are," wailed Caroline.

" What is your name, Madam ? Are you alone ? "

" Utterly alone in the whole world," she cried.

The words evidently touched her hearer. She heard bolts being withdrawn. Then the door opened, and a small, nervous little man peeped out. He was dressed in a dingy night wrap, and had an absurd little nightcap on his head. The tassel dangled dangerously near the candle which he held within an inch of his nose. He looked frightened to death at the apparition of female distress that greeted his eyes.

" Lord Byron ; is he at home ?" Caroline wrung her hands.

" I'm sure I don't know, Madam."

" You ought to. These are his rooms."

" Upstairs, Madam. But you rang my bell."

It dawned on Caroline that she had inadvertently touched the wrong bell. She had awakened the little chemist whose shop was under Byron's first floor. Strategy was needed. She called it to her aid. She swayed to and fro like a leaf in the wind, and then suddenly tottered inside the doorway.

" A chemist ! Thank heavens ! I feel so ill," she murmured, and put her hands to her breast.

" Air ! Air ! " she whispered, faintly.

" No ! Don't come in. Let me help you outside," cried the little man in alarm. Caroline promptly fell at his feet in a well simulated swoon, murmuring :

" Lord Byron ! Call him."

Then she lay on the dusty floor in a graceful heap. The man put down the candle, took it up, looked at the lady, then at the stairs. He was divided between the impulse to pick her up, or to rush to his shop for some restorative. But the difficulty of the keys was worst of all. They were upstairs in his bedroom, and the candle was going. It suddenly flickered out completely.

" Dear ! Dear ! Dear ! Here's a pretty fix," he said aloud. The lady moaned dismally. She was now beset with a fear of spiders or beetles running over her. Her fingers felt the dust, and she longed to get up. Then she heard the chemist hurry away, and left in the darkness a wild fear assailed her. The Byronic temper was a thing to be feared. If its owner should be angry at her nocturnal visit she would be in for a

bad time of it. Should she get up and fly? Then she heard voices and steps, so down she flopped again uttering feeble little moans. A second later and the chemist returned with Mr. Fletcher, who was carrying a light. That worthy stopped and looked down on her in amazement.

"Why, Lady Caroline Lamb, what are you doing here at this time of night?" he said.

"Oh, Fletcher, I am so ill, so terribly ill. Where is Lord Byron?"

"In bed, your Ladyship, and not to be disturbed. That's his orders," answered Fletcher, promptly. He set down the light and went to her assistance, helping her to rise, and dusting her dress with his handkerchief.

"She doesn't look very bad, and she speaks loud enough," he thought to himself.

"I must see his Lordship at once," said Caroline, sharply. "Take my message." How dare a valet dictate to her?

"Its more than my place is worth to do so," answered Fletcher. "I have Lord Byron's strict instructions not to admit you at all, so please go away now, and if you must call, do come in the morning."

"I refuse to go. Fletcher, go up at once! How dare you argue with me?"

"Really, marm, you had better go away," interposed the little chemist, who was standing shivering with cold, and resentful at his rest being disturbed in this manner.

"His Lordship is in bed and asleep, and I really dare not do as you ask," answered Fletcher firmly.

Caroline settled the matter by pushing the two men out of the way, and flew like a hare up the stairs in the direction of Byron's dressing room. In another minute Fletcher dashed up after her, leaving the owner of the shop alone.

"Lord, bless my soul, are they all mad?" he muttered. Then bolted the door and went off to his own room. Once inside he piled table and chairs against it. Suppose this lady should try to force her way into him. There was no knowing. These are very dangerous times, and women are rash creatures, he reflected. Then he got into bed, and lay there in trepidation. No one came, so he fell asleep.

Meanwhile, Fletcher was standing guard upstairs over Byron's bedroom, and refusing to let Lady Caroline approach. She argued with him. At last the sound of their voices penetrated to the inner room.

" Fletcher, stop that damned row ! What are you doing ? " Byron's voice sounded furious. Caroline drew back, and retreated to the window. The valet went in to Byron, and she heard them talking. A few seconds later Fletcher returned.

" His Lordship will see you presently," he said quietly, lit some more candles and withdrew. Soon after, the door opened, and Byron entered. Caroline clasped her hands, and extended them to him in mute appeal.

How glorious he looked, she thought, in his dressing gown. Its soft rich colouring enhanced the paleness of his face. Words failed her. " A Greek God," she whispered inwardly.

Unfortunately for her, his thoughts were the reverse of poetic. He had retired to bed utterly tired out and had only just succeeded in falling asleep. It was too exasperating to be awakened by a little fool who had no sense of decency.

" Really, Lady Caroline," he said, sternly. " Surely you might choose to call, if call you must, at a more fitting time. What on earth brings you here ? How dare you come ? "

She saw her only refuge was tears, and flung herself at his feet, sobbing wildly, begging him to have pity on her. She was so lonely, so desolate. Only he could save her from herself, and more to the same purpose.

Byron lifted her up firmly, led her to a chair, went over to a sideboard, poured out wine and returned.

" Drink this, and pull yourself together," he said, not unkindly.

" All that I want is your love, Byron," cried Caroline. She thrust the glass aside, upsetting the wine. He looked at her and frowned.

" Oh, my beloved ! I have given up home, friends, honour, for you to-night," she wailed.

" Indeed," he answered, drily, " have I asked you to do so ? " He could see she was acting, and refused to treat her seriously. His chief concern was to persuade her to go home quietly, and not make a scene.

" Is your carriage waiting ? " he asked.

She shook her head.

" I will order mine at once," he said, and moved to the door.

" Byron, stay ! " He turned. She had risen and rushed to interest him.

" Don't you realize ? I have left my home for ever."

" You have not," he answered, quietly. " You will go

back there at once. And if you have any feeling of gratitude left, thank God for such a noble husband as Sir William Lamb. Other women are not so fortunate."

She could not know that he saw a lonely woman sitting on a well-known terrace, alone, despairing and forsaken. She was too selfish to note the pain in his voice, the sadness in his manner. Her one thought was how to entangle him, and so compromise herself that he could not reject her.

"Byron, I have nothing. Nothing. Why are you so cruel to me? I love you! I love you! I cannot kill this passion in my soul. It is burning me every hour. You have awakened it. I have no care for anyone in the world but you."

"Your children, surely."

"No! You! You! You!" she cried fiercely. "I want to be with you always; to see your face; to kiss your hand! Only that! I have flung away the world. It is well lost for you. And they would not let me come to you. That barbarian downstairs tried to stop me, but I fainted at his feet."

She recited this in her best tragedy manner. To her utter amazement, Byron suddenly threw back his head, and burst out into a fit of laughter. Fletcher had related the scene in the passage, and her words aroused his sense of humour.

"It's no use, Caroline," he said at last. "I can see you giving that poor little wretch downstairs a fright, and then flopping down on the floor."

"What! You dare to mock me; to jeer at my suffering." She was furious. "Ah, you are callous! Now I believe the very worst I have heard of you!"

He rose. His merriment vanished. Bowing to her frigidly, he retorted:

"And yet, my dear Lady Caroline, you trust yourself alone, at midnight, with me. Are you wise?"

"Ah! you can throw me aside now."

He had gained the door this time when she threw herself at his feet and broke out into hysterical wailings, begging him to have pity on her. To forgive. She had not meant a word. She would kill herself. He tried to release himself to raise her, but she clung to him with the strength of desperation.

"Have you no shame; no pity on yourself?" he asked. This is not love. It is passion. It is madness. You shall return to Melbourne House at once, and I will take you there

myself. I refuse to have you here and allow you to ruin your own name."

On hearing this, she became unmanageable. He felt alarmed, and watched her lying on the sofa in a pitiable state of despair. In this mood the only thing to be done was to allow her to exhaust herself He rang the bell, and Fletcher entered.

"My carriage, please, as soon as you can get it round here," he said, quietly. His tone showed her there would be no chance of resisting.

"Let me die," she moaned. "My love for you is killing me, Byron. Who can control love?"

He looked down on her with pity.

"Who, indeed?" he said, sadly. "I am grieved, Caroline. But, for the sake of others, you must be protected from your own weakness."

She saw she had lost the day.

"You will try to think kindly of your poor little squirrel?" she whispered.

"Let us forget to-night, my dear, and remember that I am always willing to be your friend," he answered, gently.

He became kindness itself, and assisted her to put on her cloak. Then left her to dress.

When he returned, the carriage was waiting. Telling Fletcher to retire for the night, Byron offered his arm to the subdued Caroline, and led her downstairs. He was very silent now, and there was a great dignity and sadness about him. It awed her mean little soul. She sat beside him not daring to touch his hand or speak. The journey back to Melbourne House was accomplished in silence.

When they arrived, they found Lady Melbourne waiting.

"Caroline, you've nearly killed your poor mother," was that lady's greeting. It transpired that Lady Bessborough had fainted in the carriage when she and Lady Melbourne had driven off to Byron's in search of the truant. Seeing his place in darkness they had gone on to Holland House and afterwards Lady Jersey's, but returned home completely baffled.

"Hush! Don't be too severe on her to-night; she is ill," said Byron to her.

"And what about us, I should like to know? Now, Caroline, up you go to your room, and thank your stars that Sir William is not in. I believe the House is sitting up all

night, but there's no reason why we should for a little fool like you."

Caroline became all penitence at once. Her mother led her weeping from the room.

"My dear Byron, she's as mad as a hatter. What am I to say to you?" said her aunt. "I must put an end to this."

"As soon as you like," answered Byron, wearily.

"You're tired. Its abominable of Caroline to give you all this trouble. Never mind! There is an end to it!"

"I've said it before," she repeated. "You must marry! Now there's my niece, Isabella Milbanke. She is the very girl to make you happy."

"Is she, indeed?" was the reply.

"No sarcasm now," replied Lady Melbourne. Byron turned away.

"I'm sorry. I must say good night. I'm very tired. Excuse me."

She laid her hand on his arm.

"Would you care to stay here? It's very late," she asked.

"With Caroline under the same roof? No, thank you."

She looked keenly at him.

"There's something troubling you. Now, my dear boy, can't you trust an old woman?"

"Don't talk to me about marriage, that's all. It's a farce."

"Well, is this sort of thing a blessing?" asked she with an expressive wave of her hands. "You really ought to settle down, Byron; you're far too good looking and too emotional to live alone."

"I don't always," he replied, with a laugh.

"Hush, no more of that. Surely, it would be better for you to have your own home than remain a stranger in other people's."

"I've never known what it was to have a home in the real sense." His voice became very pathetic. She saw the tears in his eyes. "You've made me one, and see what trouble follows."

Lady Melbourne sighed.

"Anyway," continued Byron, gently, "you've done all you can to smooth my way. You are one of my few, true friends. I often wonder why you were not my mother."

"Goodness gracious! how should I know? But is there any reason I shouldn't be your aunt?" she said, amusedly.

" Your niece is very charming," said Byron. " But if I ever thought of her, it would be because such a marriage would make you my real relation."

" Ah, flatterer ! " She tapped him with her fan. The clock was striking two. He yawned.

" I must go, really," he said. " I can't keep that poor devil of a coachman up till morning."

" It's that now. I'll come down to the door with you," she replied ; and they went downstairs together.

" Supposing I sound Isabella for you, and see what I can do ? " she persisted.

" Oh, anything you like," he replied, as he bade her good night once more.

Lady Melbourne watched him into his carriage, and returning to her own room, wrote a long letter to Lady Noel Milbanke, asking her permission for Byron to propose to the young lady in question. Then she retired to rest fully satisfied at the very successful ending to a difficult day.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The weeks flew on and for some time Byron seemed to avoid Melbourne House. Isabella Milkanke had commenced to correspond with him. Her letters were pretty frequent. He answered them at intervals but was considerably puzzled at her pretty excuses, prim apologies for her epistles. She also managed to convey the impression that her sentiments towards him were of the warmest that friendship could desire.

At the same time the delicate proposal which had been conveyed to her mother, Lady Noel, by her aunt, Lady Melbourne, had been rejected by her on the grounds that she feared Lord Byron did not possess those sentiments of religious convictions which were calculated to promote her happiness if he became her husband. But otherwise she was most anxious that there should be no diminution of regard.

John Cam Hobhouse was shown some of her letters by Byron in a moment of confidence.

"Why, Miss Isabella Milbanke is in love with you," he said laughingly, "and is trying to tell you so as plainly as possible. By the way, I met Lady Noel one day in town. She made some very personal inquiries about your financial position. Wanted to know if you were publishing any poems likely to bring you in a good return. I fenced the question, of course."

Byron laughed—rather dismally, his friend thought—and threw down one of Isabella's letters on the table.

"Marriage, my dear Hobhouse, is not for me."

"Well, Byron, if ever it was, I should think that Miss Isabella Milbanke would be a very proper person with which to make the experiment."

"That's queer; Tom Moore thinks differently. He met her at Lady Westmorland's. Says she's very cold and puritanical, and thinks her quite lacking in affection."

"I should hardly imagine Mr. Moore would be a very safe judge of any lady's qualities unless she was pretty," answered

Hobhouse rather stiffly. Between him and the little Irish bard there was a certain degree of coldness.

"I believe Moore's right," remarked Byron thoughtfully. "Anyway, I have a great respect for the young lady and think she deserves a better husband that I could make her. Why don't you marry her, Hobhouse? She's intellectual and a genius—at arithmetic."

Hobhouse smiled.

"Marriage, my dear Byron, interrupts a man's career. I shall not consider a wife for many years yet."

"Oh, you mean to be Prime Minister first: settle the state of the country, and then select your partner. A very good idea."

He lay back in his chair and glanced at Hobhouse. Then looked away and said in a low voice,

"Oblivion is best, my friend. At least where the heart's concerned. We must never remember we have one. I manage to forget that fact sometimes."

"Byron, I do wish you would try to do that in your work and not in other ways," replied his friend gently.

"Leave me to work out my own salvation in my own fashion." Byron spoke heavily. Hobhouse watched him.

"Why not go out more? You are giving up so many social engagements lately. I don't think that the Cocoa Tree and Watiers are a very good exchange for Holland House," suggested the prudent Hobhouse. He had been very anxious about Byron lately, and had noted that the old look of loneliness and misery had come back.

"I'm tired of women and their silly chatter. One meets men at the clubs and gets some intellect, anyway."

"That's scarcely just, Byron. There is plenty of that at other houses, and less danger," added Hobhouse pointedly.

"You call Melbourne House very safe, with that wretched little Caroline Lamb always watching for me. And Lady Melbourne, bless her heart, trying to make a match for me with her niece!"

Byron laughed a little bitterly. Hobhouse replied:

"Well, remember you are due there to-morrow night. It's a special evening. The reception for the Allies. You won't disappoint Lady Melbourne, I'm sure."

"All right, Hobby, if I'm not too tired."

The function in question was a brilliant success. But no Lord Byron put in an appearance. Lady Melbourne had

just retired to rest after a most exhausting night, thankful to see the last of her guests and enjoy a few moments' respite before going to bed.

There is always an extraordinary quiet after a large social gathering. At four o'clock in the morning the air was very still at Melbourne House.

The maid was waiting for her mistress and yawned behind her fingers, remarking something about the lateness of the hour.

"Just take off my gown and brush my hair, Jenny, and then get to bed," said her Ladyship kindly. "You need not come to me before mid-day."

"Thank you, my Lady," said the girl, covering the stout matronly form in an elegant wrap of lavender silk. She then knelt down and took off the shoes, replacing them with slippers. Just as she was commencing preparations on the beautiful silver hair, a loud knock startled them both. It echoed through the house.

"Who in the world is that?" said Lady Melbourne. They listened. There was another, louder than the last. Then the footman went down, crossed the marble pavement of the hall and opened the great doors.

"Open the door, Jenny." The girl did so. The sound of voices floated up.

"Her Ladyship is in bed, my Lord," said the footman.

She rose and went out on the landing.

"I want a word with Lady Melbourne," said a rather drowsy deep voice.

"Is that you, Byron?" called out Lady Melbourne.

"Hullo, sweetheart, are you in?" called up Byron, who by this time had been admitted by the rather horrified footman.

"Jenny, you can go to bed. Yes, it's all right, Clement. I can see Lord Byron for a few minutes. Come up, my dear boy. I've been expecting you. But not at this time of day," she added.

Coming up proved a matter of some difficulty. Byron made the journey with great thoroughness. He refused to be beaten by a mere staircase, even though it seemed to slide up and down in a most annoying fashion. But he planted one foot firmly and then drew the other up and stood on each step with a foolish smile as he watched Lady Melbourne looking at him from the landing.

"It's as far as the road to heaven," he said.

Half way he stumbled, and she thought it fit time to come to the rescue. So she descended quickly, took his arm and guided him. He reached the top safely with the aid of her arm.

" Now, my dear boy, what do you mean by this ? Trying to compromise an old woman at four in the morning. You're a real disgrace," she laughed. He murmured something.

" Oh, you want to talk to me, do you ? All right, you're very ambitious. Come along into my boudoir for a little while. I sincerely hope you drove here. Is your carriage waiting ? "

He nodded and stumbled in, sinking down on the nearest settee. Then closed his eyes and at last, conscious that some excuse was at least necessary, he opened them again and tried to explain.

It appeared that he had started out for Melbourne House some hours ago. But for some reason the Cocoa Tree seemed to have planted itself in his way. There he had met Scrope. " Good old Scrope ! Had to stop and cheer him up ; wanted to borrow my pistols to shoot himself with, because he was broke ! " Having left this gentleman somewhat restored to commonsense, Byron had gone on to Watier's—why he didn't know—and there he had met . . . now, whom had he met ? Well, never mind—bad memory for names—and then he assured Lady Melbourne he had really meant to come and see her on Sunday. . . . .

" But this is Thursday morning, Byron." He looked at her.

" Where's Friday gone to, then ? "

" How should I know," answered his hostess, much amused. " Taken the mail coach and gone to the north, perhaps."

He knitted his brows and repeated several times, " Taken the coach to the north." Then passed a nervous hand over his brows and shivered.

" Little mother, give me some brandy, there's a dear," he said.

" Sorry, Byron, the butler's in bed and he sleeps with the key under his pillow," she replied drily.

" Oh, I'll soon get them." Byron tried to rise and fell back. Then decided to stay where he was.

" You're hopeless, my son. Come, give me your news, and then I must pack you off. Don't you realize I want to go to bed ? Now what have you come here at this time of day to tell me ? "

He looked at her vaguely.

"Oh, nothing," he murmured.

"Nothing!" ejaculated Lady Melbourne; "so you've knocked up the house, scandalized my servants, and kept me from my lawful rest to tell me nothing. I don't believe you. And why haven't you been to see me lately? If it's Caroline, well, she's still in Ireland. And you're not breaking your heart because Isabella refused you, I'm sure."

Byron sat up and laughed softly. The rest, the charm of her motherly presence and the quiet beauty of the room restored him.

"Isabella! Oh, bless her heart, she's as innocent as a daisy. Tell her not to waste her time on a reprobate like me."

Lady Melbourne looked at him quizzically.

"Well, what is it, then?"

Byron suddenly leant forward and covered his face with his hands. She leaned towards him and laid her hand on his arm.

"That old love trouble of yours, my dear?"

He nodded. Bit his lips and clenched his hands. In the hours of deep friendship that had sprung up between the two, he had opened his heart to her one night about Mary Musters. She had known the Chaworths and had heard the story of Mary's disastrous marriage for some time.

"By the way, Byron, when you write to me about Mary, hadn't you better choose another initial? Your last letter nearly fell into Lord Melbourne's hands by accident. Your writing was so queer, the footman nearly mistook 'Lord' for 'Lady.' By a miracle I met him on the way to the study and got your epistle in time."

He looked at her, concentrating on her words.

"You see, Byron," she continued, "when you sit down at midnight to dash off letters to me and don't know how very bad your handwriting can be—no offence, my son—well, M. C., the initials for Mary Chaworth, might create some trouble. It's her you are worrying about, I know."

He looked so hopelessly unhappy that she rose, went over to the table and came back with a small glass of wine.

"Now I am not going to give you any more than that to-night," she said, with a kindly smile. He took the glass gratefully. Then drained off the wine and lay back for a few seconds with his eyes closed.

" What a woman you are ! You seem to know what's the matter with a man by the glance of your eye."

" I've had a very long experience of the sex, Byron. But I have never met with anyone quite so bent on wrecking his constitution for a long time. You're a poet, so it makes it worse."

" That letter," said Byron quickly : " did Lord Melbourne open it ? "

" Not that time. But it must not happen again. The name of Mary Chaworth is pretty well known. I remember, too, that her second name is *Ann*. *Mary Ann Chaworth*. Now just allude to *A*. Avoid using the initial M. I shall know whom you mean."

" Yes, but A. might be taken for Annabella," answered Byron ; " you always call her by that name. Of course, we must remember Augusta. But we have no need to use any initial for her name."

" Of course not. You always write of your sister in her full Christian name. But as regards my niece. Her name is Isabella Anne. Now with Caroline always prying about I don't want to use the first name. As likely as not, if she ever got hold of one of our letters she would insult my niece and cause all sorts of trouble. Now let us do this. When you refer to my niece, use her second initial. Call her ' *my A*.' Then Mary can be ' *your A* ' Try to remember, if you can."

Byron nodded.

" Whatever else I may forget, I always remember anything that is connected with Mary. I wish I could forget, sometimes."

" Have you tried, my son ? " she asked.

" Yes, and what happens ? I want her more every day. Musters is treating her horribly. I'm torn between two impulses. I want to go to her and say, ' Come away out of it and be my own .' "

Byron had never mentioned his brief visit to Annesley Hall and that strange vision on the night of the storm. It was too sacred. Mary had ceased writing since. He wondered why.

" You could only offer her one thing she dare not take, her freedom," said Lady Melbourne slowly. " The Chaworths are a very proud race. They hold their name high. I believe Mary's mother would sooner see her in her coffin that the mistress of any man. No matter how unhappy her marriage may be, how much she loved another. Honestly, my dear

Byron, in these days of folly and licence, when half the women in society are utterly corrupt, I rather honour her for it myself."

Byron's eyes blazed.

"You mean Mary ought to live in chains for the rest of her life?" Lady Melbourne sighed.

"I don't know. Musters may die some day, and then she would be free to wed; there would be no scandal or shame."

"Musters die—not a bit of it!" cried Byron recklessly; those sort of curs live, I tell you, to wear the heart out of others and torture them. By God, I can't stand it much longer. I swear I shall go to Mary."

"How do you know she would wish it?"

Byron's face flushed.

"She does, she does—longs for it, I know," he said strongly.

Lady Melbourne shook her head.

"Oh, it all sounds so easy to you, Byron. But there are mountains of trouble in the way. To lure Mary Musters abroad, make her name a byword throughout the land—oh, from what I know of Musters he wouldn't spare the family. I believe it would break her heart. Even passion and love cannot stand the test of open shame. Byron, that race is too near your own. It is too great a family to bring such a stain on. *I tell you, to do it would be a crime for which there would be no forgiveness.* Remember what an injury the Chaworths have suffered already at the hands of a Byron. Ah, with a woman who was willing to dare all, who cared nothing for race—ah, that would be different. But she's been so true to her husband. There are so few of us nowadays who hold up the banner of faith and honour under such crosses. Try to forget her. Try to be content."

"Don't you even understand me?" cried Byron in despair.

"Yes, and I understand her as well. One woman can fathom another's heart. It needs a bold and reckless woman to leap the barriers. When they do so, how seldom the world ever forgives or understands!"

She spoke with great feeling. A long experience of human nature, a great capacity for receiving confidences and a vast love and pity for many human hearts she had seen bleeding, had made Lady Melbourne a true mother of Society. She knew the woman's tragedy in this better than Byron could realize.

"I want her, I want her," was all he could say.

" Ah, that's the root of it," she said shrewdly. " It's not her so much. You're lonely, my poor boy. You need a home of your own. You ought to have one instead of living like this. You want an anchor. Marriage, Byron, marriage."

" Let's have no more marriages," Byron cried wildly.

" For the love of heaven, don't start quoting Shakespeare to me at this time of the night or morning," she ejaculated. " If you will turn night into day, drink brandy and brood about your troubles, why of course you will never see the matter in a sensible light."

For an instant Byron looked furious, and made as if he would rise. But one look at the kindly face and one touch of that motherly hand on his arm made him sink back again.

" You know one of the strong reasons that Mrs. Chaworth would not favour your suit, of course," she said abruptly. You and Mary are cousins. The connection is too close. That's a very real objection. Byron, my dear, it's your mad love for her that is the cause of all the trouble. You will persist in making her your ideal. Fate has parted you. That would not have been the case if it had been intended you two should marry."

" For the love of God, see it from our side. Did fate intend her to marry Musters and live the life she is leading now ? "

Lady Melbourne shook her head.

" She chose him herself. But why can't you remember, Byron, that you need a little happiness yourself ? I tell you I am worried to death about you. I hate to see you give way like this."

Byron sighed heavily.

" It's no use. I must do something to forget. I hear Mary calling me.'

" There is a safer way. You're like a splendid ship drifting before the wind. You surely don't want to live all your life tearing your heart for another man's wife. Try other weapons. Try wholesome happiness for a change. A good wife would be your salvation.

Byron rose wearily.

" I believe you are right. Augusta has often said the same."

" Well, then, let me speak to my niece again. Isabella is really very much in love with you."

" So much so that she refused me. Oh, do spare me. It always ends in your niece."

" And why not ? Shall I write again ? "

" I suppose you'll propose for me next," laughed Byron.

" Oh, go along and get to bed, do," said Lady Melbourne, and led him to the door.

" Come, I'll see you to your carriage," she added.

" So that I shan't land at the bottom," he answered.

He gave her a good hug.

" It was really disgraceful of me to come and knock you up like this," he said.

" Oh, you're a disgrace, anyway," she laughed. Then waved her hand to him as he got into the carriage and drove away.

On the journey back Byron firmly persuaded himself that it was his duty to marry Isabella Milbanke. He would obey Lady Melbourne and give up brooding and brandy. Reform altogether! When he arrived he found Fletcher waiting. He was soon in bed and fast asleep. He awoke very late in the day to find the valet standing by the bed with a pile of letters.

" Oh, damn letters! Give me some soda water and make me presentable," said Byron.

Later on he went to look over his correspondence. One letter on the top caught his eye. It was marked " Immediate." He knew the hand ; tore it open and read it through.

The air tingled. Everything within his being vibrated, his heart beat madly. He struggled inwardly and stared out of the window, thinking over all that he should do and all that he desired to do. He read the letter again and again. His heart throbbed and ached. He hastily put the letter in his pocket and flinging the door open, called out :

" Fletcher, Fletcher."

" Yes, my Lord."

" Order the carriage at once. Get me some clothes ready for travelling. I must go to Nottingham. Prepare as soon as possible. There must be no delay."

His face was alight with the fire of love, his eyes shone like lamps. Well may Lady Melbourne talk. Well may Isabella care or not care.

One word could make him forget the world, caution, everything.

" Come " was the word, and written by the hand of Mary Chaworth-Musters.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When Byron arrived at Newstead three days later a complete change seemed to have taken possession of him.

The wild excitement, the recklessness, the mad desire to rush over to Annesley Hall had gone. A calm, born of triumph and assurance, reigned in their stead.

In moments of crisis this happened to him. Often an entire cessation of all feeling whatever would follow one of these mental upheavals that so often occurred. His was a strange and deeply emotional nature. Few of his friends ever saw the real Byron. He was by turns strong, weak, wild, gentle, volcanic and infinitely tender. Masterful where men are concerned, but as weak as water with regard to women. He could be guided by the person he could trust and reverence, but maddened beyond control by those he found base or hard.

He often sought to analyse himself. Now he felt a great wonder at this sensation of self-possession that had come over him. He had no wish to see Mary until he had prepared himself mentally for the interview. A sense of dignity and pride rose up within him.

So he became once more the rather unapproachable Byron of the London drawing-rooms, the dandy with his mask of reserve.

Had he understood the cause he would have realized that in times of great stress, nature comes to our aid and throws a mantle around us to screen us from the gaze of those who might penetrate our weakness all too soon.

All that he knew was that Mary Musters had called to him as a friend in her distress. If she wanted no more, he was arming himself to help her to the utmost of his power. To stifle his own longings for her sake and act a part, even to her.

To the casual observer he might have passed for the Lord Byron, the petted idol of London, driving to some social function of which he was to be the chief guest of the evening.

No one could have guessed he was a passionate suitor on his way to the woman he adored.

His unexpected arrival at Newstead Abbey had thrown the servants into a fluster. Old Joe Murray was full of excuses that no room was prepared for his Lordship. He also made anxious inquiries regarding dinner and supper.

"That's all right, Joe," answered Byron, "Fletcher can see to my room. As for food, I want nothing but some tea and biscuits. These can be sent up to me while dressing. I shall require the carriage again about seven."

"I must drive over to Annesley and let Mary know I have arrived," he thought. It would reassure her. There was no other reason for calling so late.

Fletcher, too experienced ever to express surprise, assisted his master to dress in his usual quiet helpful manner. To-night Byron was most fastidious in his choice and selected his most elaborate clothes. Then he surveyed himself in the glass with a long and thoughtful inspection. Beau Brummel himself could scarcely have been more careful in his arrangement of his stock than Byron was in adjusting the open collar of fine white lawn to his satisfaction.

The entire unsuitability of all this for an informal visit in the country vanished from his mind. He was yielding to a strange whim of his own.

He wanted to visit Mary as the author of "Childe Harold" rather than the former despairing suitor. He preferred to drive over in state now. In former days he had ridden across the hills of Annesley, the poor "Lame Boy," as she had once called him, driven to seek some companionship from his mother's violence.

Nor had he forgotten that strange night of dreams. Now his own dignity prompted him to offer her the protection of a man she might rely on. Self-dependent! He must appear passionless.

So all emotions that rose up were carefully barred down again. The hand that trembled as he had leant on his stick at first, now grew firm. He threw back his head and slowly passed out of the room, down the stairs.

When he had stepped into his carriage the light was deepening over the grounds. He directed the man to drive to Annesley Hall, with a strange feeling of starting for Melbourne or Holland House instead. The London atmosphere was intensified by his choice of attire and remained very strong as he

drove on through the twilight, the carriage lamps lighting up some hedge or clump of trees as they flashed past. In less than twenty minutes he saw the well-remembered gates and gave a great start. Then recollected and checked himself.

He alighted leisurely, ringing the bell with a steady hand. The door opened and a servant stood there.

" Is Mrs. Chaworth-Musters at home."

" Yes, your Lordship."

" Kindly inform her that I have called and would like to see her if she is not engaged."

The servant asked him to enter and then led the way upstairs, knocked at a door and entered.

" This way, your Lordship. I think Mrs. Musters is in her own room. I will inform her."

He bent his head in acknowledgement and passed into the " Antique Oratory," as he had once called it. Then looked round with a beating heart. His colour came and went. He drew himself up stiffly.

Why had she chosen this chamber of all others? He knew it so well. There stood the piano where she used to sing and play to him. Above the shelf stood the portrait of William Chaworth.

Now came the task of mastering himself. The veins stood out on his forehead and he breathed hard. The knob of his stick hurt his hand. He had gripped it like iron. He relaxed his hold and once more fought down his emotion with a fierce determination not to let it get uppermost again.

A slight sound made him turn sharply.

Mary had entered the room and stood at the door looking at him with frightened eyes. A long silence ensued.

This was a new Byron to her. Pale, proud and awe-inspiring. A polished man of fashion with the unmistakable splendour of his recent triumphs in his face and bearing. He seemed almost out of place in the homely room. On his visit before, he had been himself—boyish, ardent, unstudied. Now she feared him. She trembled for her own boldness.

Byron gazed at her. He saw the wraith of the Mary Chaworth he had known in boyhood. She had surely died and risen again from the tomb—a timid, nervous creature, pale and fragile, looking pathetically ghost-like in her white clinging gown. It was a piteous effort to recall a girlhood that had long passed away. A woman's loving subterfuge to awaken old memories.

No need to ask her if she had suffered in returning to Colwick Hall. What a penalty she was paying for her devotion to duty!

She closed the door and advanced to meet him. Byron went to her at once, took her hand, bowed over it and made some response when she welcomed him. He did not look at her now, for he felt she was shaking from head to foot.

"You will stay to dinner, of course, Lord Byron." She crossed to the bell. How useful the commonplaces of life are to us in emergencies. He came to her rescue, smiled, assumed a light manner and jokingly reminded her that he never took that meal, begged her not to trouble her head on his account.

"Besides, my carriage is waiting," he added. "I only arrived to-day."

"Oh, you must stay as long as you can," she said, impulsively. "Let me send the carriage away. You can return in mine. It is too cold to keep the horses out there."

It was in reality quite warm, but he did not contradict her. She gave orders to the servants. Then turned to him, now more her natural self.

"Sit down, please. What am I doing to keep you standing so long? You will take some wine?"

He shook his head. She laughed shyly.

"I suppose your work will not allow you even that privilege. I always revel in your poems. When are you going to give us another canto of 'Childe Harold'?"

"Not yet," he replied. "I think he deserves a little rest."

"It was wonderful! Wonderful!"

"I am indeed honoured, Mrs. Musters." But his voice sounded ironical. Her eyes filled with tears. Despite his endeavour to help her and stifle his own feelings, these formalities were getting on his nerves. She broke down the barrier.

"Don't call me by that odious name. I hate it. Oh, let us be Mary and Byron again as we used to be. As we were when you came here and stayed. You remember that storm. I was so frightened."

"Yes, I remember it." His eyes searched her face. "We both had strange dreams that night," he added slowly.

His voice sounded very cold to his hearer. She longed to hear the deep warm ring in it she knew so well. Byron rose in silence and walked over to the mantelshelf and stood looking up at the portrait of William Chaworth.

" Byron, I am so sorry," she cried.

He turned.

" I ought to have remembered how you dislike that picture. It should have been removed upstairs." She was speaking hurriedly. " I hate it myself. Servants are so stupid. They forget."

Byron looked again at the portrait.

" Believe me, I had entirely forgotten its existence."

And all the time he was wondering why Mary did not speak out. Must he remind her that she had summoned him. What did all this fencing mean ?

" You find it very easy to forget," she said tremulously.

" Do I ? " He came towards her now. " Are you so very sure of that, Mary ? "

She flushed and trembled under his gaze.

" You wrote to me, my dear. I have come. Tell me in what way I can serve you," he said gently.

" I ought not to have written, Byron. It was wrong of me. But I have been so lonely, I have suffered so much lately. . ." Her voice trailed off. He limped heavily now and stood facing her.

" Mary, I have heard all about your troubles. I knew that it must be so. When you told me, months ago, you intended to go back to Colwick Hall, I knew what it must end in. Now sit down and remember I am here to help you." How calm his voice sounded. He led her to the sofa and then came to a stop, drew back and looked at her earnestly. Her past submission to her mother and Musters—that cut him now like a knife. Was he calmly to talk over her troubles and see a repetition of the same thing ? Go back to London to more misery, and fight out his own battle again ? He remembered Lady Melbourne's words—

" You would offer her the one thing she would not dare to accept . . . her freedom."

He glanced down at her white face. Would this frightened woman ever dare ? Now he hated himself for the thought. Had he not come down to be her friend, her staunch friend ? No more ?

So they stood looking at each other, each knowing what they wanted . . . neither being the first to speak.

The strain proved too much for Mary. She sank down on the sofa, buried her face in her hands and burst into tears. Byron's face quivered . . . grew tense again, and he stood

beside her, put his hand on her shoulder and tried to speak calmly.

"Mary . . . don't do this. Try to control yourself. Look up, my dear. Think of the future . . . try to forget. Make yourself forget . . . it's the only way. You have your freedom . . . your little child. . . ."

Still the passionate weeping continued. A wild cry broke from Byron.

"In God's name, why did you send for me?" He checked himself, bit his lips till they bled, and looked down on her in despair. Mary gasped out—

"Oh, Byron, forgive me. I ought not to have written. But I want a friend so much."

Then a wave of passion swept over her and she seized his hand and covered it with kisses. He could feel her hot tears on it.

"Byron, can you ever forgive my sending you away . . . years ago? I knew when it was too late. What have I done?"

The ice was breaking now. Byron tried to stay her, but she lost all self-control. The weary years of hopelessness, of misery and resignation, beat down her own resolves. She was hungry for love, for happiness.

"Mary, don't do this. My dear, remember. . . ."

"Oh, let me speak," she cried wildly. "I have made you suffer so long. But I loved you, Byron. When I stood at the altar with Musters, I knew I had done wrong. I loved you. And that day when you came to stay here, I asked you—it was my fault. . . Do you remember? . . ."

REMEMBER! Ah, God, had he ever forgotten? The room was alive with memories. Fast and thick they came now, sending the blood to his heart, making his pulses beat madly as he bent down over her. Then she felt his arms around her and looked up.

"Byron," she panted in terror, "leave me. I am mad to-night. I don't know myself. Go now, I beg of you. Let us forget this. Oh, I know I must live on doing my duty. I want to be strong. . . . I do so want to be brave. . . ."

His voice rang out, vibrating with passion.

"What's the good of it? What's the good of it?"

She sprang to her feet and looked up. His eyes were alight with joy, his face transformed with a wild exultation.

"Mary, beloved, come to me at last. You're mine now.

Oh, thank God, thank God! You've broken down the barriers yourself. You sent for me. It's wonderful. It's glorious! Just you and I in all the world!"

The room was darkening. He heard a stifled cry and saw the white glimmer of her dress before him. She ran like a mad thing and stood, panting, on the terrace outside. He followed and took her fiercely in his arms, kissing her again and again.

"Byron, Byron!"

He laughed aloud.

"Byron, for the love of God! My husband!" She strained to release herself, terrified at the flame of her own lighting.

He looked down into the depths of her soul.

"Your husband!" he cried. "Can you speak to me of him in this hour? You are the woman I have worshipped all my life. Suffered for! Gone through the agony of hell in trying to forget! At every turn I hear of Musters, his cruelty; his faithlessness! You say you never loved him. I knew it all along. Now from this hour you belong to me, Mary."

"Dearest friend . . . ." she faltered.

"Friend!" cried Byron, with a terrible intensity; "no, not that formality. You only say it, trying to persuade yourself. You called me. You felt my heart crying out to you in the night. Ah, was that why you came to my room here in this house, months ago? Oh, was it your spirit? No matter now. Have no fear of the truth, beloved. That alone can make us happy. I love you so."

His voice was painful with tears, the great sobs rose up in his throat. He looked like one possessed. She was as pale as death, clinging to him with the desperation of love.

"Byron, you have suffered too. Oh, my darling, I never dreamed of that. I thought your fame had healed that wound—that you were happy."

"Life is barren to me without you, beloved," he replied in a low voice. "MARY, YOU WERE EVER MY MORNING STAR, MY ASTARTE."

"Astarte?" she whispered, wonderingly.

"YOU ARE LIKE THE STATUE OF ASTARTE," he answered. I saw her in Greece. I remember when I noted she carried a cross in her hand I said to myself, 'Mary bears her cross as well.'"

"I am no goddess, Byron, only a weak woman," she answered.

" You sent for me because you love me, Mary. Was it not so ? "

" Yes, I wanted you," she answered, looking up into his eyes. Oh, Byron, from the hour I first saw you come back into my life I wanted you. I love you, dear, with all my heart. I have no will but yours. Oh, let us take up our lives and teach me how to forget the past, how to remember only that you have waited for me all these years."

He uttered a strange cry and folded her in his arms. They remained so while the sky deepened to purple, then to a sapphire blue. The evening star, glowing like a great lamp, came out—solitary, magnificent, soon to be dimmed by the crescent moon. The evening breeze blew Mary's hair from her forehead and stirred Byron's curls, cooling his hot eyes. He had been weeping.

The star was joined by other stars now. A bird going late to his nest, chirruped twice in the wondrous calm. The terrace roses filled the air with perfume. Other flowers, growing beneath the wall, wafted up their scent to mingle with it. The fresh grass, dew-spangled, added its breath to the air and the garden became a dream of loveliness—unreal, yet palpitating with nature.

Mary raised her head. Byron was calmer now—silent, but breathing audibly. They had been standing on the terrace longer than they knew. It was growing chilly. He touched her hand. His own was equally cold.

" Come with me into the house, Byron, it's so dark here," she whispered. He lifted himself from her support, then caught at the coping with a sudden cry.

" Oh, God," he said, under his breath.

" Come in. Let me hold you, Byron. Let me help you."

She put her arm around him and they went into the hall like tired children stumbling in the dark woods, lost. They reached the door and entered.

" Come, Byron, come up to my room. You can rest there," she said.

" Yes, Mary, your room. I can rest there," he answered.

He stumbled again. His foot was giving him agony. She drew his head down to her shoulder and kissed him. Then they went up the stairs as they had crossed the terrace—like tired children stumbling in the dark woods, lost.

CHAPTER NINE

In the months that followed, poetry and faith came back to Byron in one mighty wave. He seemed to tread on air. All thought of London vanished. He remained at Newstead and rode over to Annesley Hall each day, spending long hours with Mary, planning the future. Her one dread was the fear of losing her child. But, on his suggestion, she wrote to her mother arranging that the little one should return home.

" Your daughter shall come abroad with us, my darling. Possession is nine points of the law," he said.

Then letters to Augusta, Hobhouse and Moore were despatched, all full of wild enthusiasm. To his sister he wrote telling her that she need have no future fears for him now. His life was quite complete. She replied, sending her loving greetings to Mary and telling him how much she hoped and prayed that all should be as he desired.

" You must know Augusta, my dear sister ; she's the one true friend I have had since my boyhood," he told Mary.

Hobhouse wrote back guarded letters. Was Byron sure of the wisdom of this important step ? What of his work ? His fame ? Would John Musters really divorce his wife ? If so, what of the scandal to both of them ?

" That's good old Hobby to the life ! Always on the side of caution," said Byron, as he sat with Mary, reading the letter.

Mary looked startled. She had grown much quieter of late. Depression succeeded her wild abandon. Many a night she lay awake, filled with self-reproach, with fears for the consequence of this love, so precious, yet so full of unknown dangers. She, who had never left her home save for a few years, was going away from England to live in a strange land and leave the familiar things of childhood—not with the love and good wishes of those who had known her, but in secret. There lay the sting.

The wild glory of that evening, when reunion had followed her months of utter loneliness, had now waned. Byron's

future, his sacrifice of his own career, and, above all, the loss of her good name, rose up before her like spectres and haunted her waking hours, pursued her in her dreams.

But she never realized this when Byron was by her side. His passionate happiness enveloped her, warmed her and barred out the cold light of reason.

It was alone that Mary Musters faced her own soul. The pure woman, who has leapt the barriers of convention and duty, is seldom upheld by a lasting sense of joy. Mary was a religious woman. Her poor, delicate mind was unstrung by the cruelty of Musters and the knowledge that she might have wedded her lover years ago.

Byron, all unconscious of her misgivings, and cheered by some long letters from Tom Moore, who wrote extolling their coming flight as the happiest solution of all their past troubles, prepared to go to town and make all final arrangements. There would be much to do.

Hobhouse was to take charge of his financial affairs and proof corrections. Newstead must be leased during their absence, servants dismissed. Fletcher begged hard to go with his master, notwithstanding the fact that he must leave his wife in England for some time at least.

" Mrs. Fletcher wouldn't hear of my leaving you, my Lord," said he, with tears in his eyes. That settled it. Byron was his hero, and without him the valet felt that ' Othello's occupation would be gone indeed.' "

The link between master and man was very deep and lasting.

So, after one very beautiful evening spent in the remembrance of old times on the terrace, Byron took his adieu and went up to London.

" Make all your own preparations, my dearest ; there must be no delay. Write to me often, and if you have any suspicion of trouble from Colwick Hall, let me know instantly."

Mrs. Clarke was still abroad, greatly to his relief. Her influence over Mary was the cause of so much unhappiness in the past that he dreaded her return.

He left Mary standing at the great gates one sunset evening and rode away with one thought in his heart. Mary was his. Nothing else mattered now.

The London season was waning a little. He was delighted to welcome Tom Moore, who had come over from Ireland, having not long before married " the sweetest girl in the

world." So the two spent many jovial hours at the Cocoa Tree Club.

Mary wrote each day. The little one was now with her. She was content. She had heard much of her husband's way of living at Colwick Hall. He had, it appeared, soon consoled himself. His vulgar mistresses were making themselves very notorious.

"All the better," thought Byron. "It will make our flight abroad more palatable to the respectable citizens of Nottingham."

Then came an alarming letter from Annesley. Mrs. Clarke had returned home unexpectedly. Some of the servants must have been spying on them. The atmosphere was charged with a silent hostility. Her mother now talked constantly of her return to John Musters.

Byron went wild with anger when he received this news. He wrote, begging and entreating Mary to be brave, be firm. The time was so short now.

What disturbed him most of all was the entire cessation of all letters from her suddenly. Just a brief note imploring him not to write, not to come until he heard again. Then a silence of some weeks.

He could stand it no longer but posted away back to Nottingham some time earlier than he had intended.

The evening of his arrival was damp and chilly. Old Joe Murray trotted about in great concern. Fletcher hurried round telling them to get good fires on, light candles, and make the place homelike. He knew that look on Byron's face as he stood in his bedroom and gazed away into the dark shadows. He knew that these same shadows have queer ways of coming out and giving people frights. Had he not found Byron, one night some years before, shivering and frozen with terror, because the room had been unduly dark, and he had sworn that the Black Monk had appeared? This spectre, by tradition, haunted the Abbey and came to warn the Byrons of any impending evil.

"I'll take care that gentleman don't get up to his tricks to-night," muttered the valet. "There mustn't be any black corner in these old rooms. His Lordship's nerves are shaky. There's something up!"

He knew every mood of Byron's. A long, watchful experience told him when trouble or anxiety was in the air.

"Just see if there are any letters for me, at once," said

Byron. (He had written to Mary telling her of his arrival.) "Find out from Joe Murray."

That worthy was busy in the pantry. Like his master, Joe suffered from occasional headaches. Anyway, as a privileged person he announced them as such, and was generally to be found trying to cure them by more wine or whatever had been the cause of the trouble. No one ever dreamed of questioning his right to imitate his betters. His service had dated back to the "Wicked Lord." He had served that gentleman when everyone else shrank from him. So, on winter evenings, he regaled the other menials with long and thrilling narrations of William Byron's madness and generally concluded with the announcement:

"He's a-wandering round the Abbey now, that he is! I've 'eard 'im many a night meself!"

Having spent some of his time lately in giving recitals of the ghost in question, to enliven the dullness of Newstead in Byron's absence, he had been missing most of the day-time. How much of that he had passed in the pantry and how much in bed was a matter of conjecture; but his Lordship's arrival had set him all of a tremble!

Fletcher unearthed him with some difficulty, and the old man emerged with his hair standing on end, a very flushed face, and an incoherence of speech which was always an indication of his "bad 'eads."

"Am I sure there ain't no letters? Of course I am!" he answered wrathfully. "Do you think I keeps 'em in my pocket?"

"No offence, Mr. Murray. Only his Lordship asked me to make certain," said Fletcher.

"How long's his Lordship a-staying?" asked Joe.

"Not long. We are going abroad, you know."

To Fletcher's amazement old Murray sat down on a barrel and looked at him with his eyes full of tears.

"Strangers," he mumbled. "More strange folk will be a-coming. The old place don't like it. It's waiting for him. Why don't Lord Byron live here?"

The other shook his head.

Shall you be a-coming to stay, then?"

"No, I go with him."

"You're lucky, Mr. Fletcher. I wish I was you." The old man looked around and lowered his voice. "Some of these new-fangled servants, they laughs at me. So they does,

when I tells 'em things. But I knows! Aye, and walls isn't the dumb things as people think. They speak sometimes."

Fletcher's first impression was that old Joe was maudlin, but the next words struck a chord in him that made him shiver.

"There's going to be no luck for him till he comes home for good—mark that! *He'll never know no peace until he comes back home for good.*"

"What is your meaning, Mr. Murray?" asked Fletcher, looking at him.

"Don't his Lordship just love the Abbey? Ah, and Miss Augusta too. It's part of him. He don't know it, but it knows him. They've tried to sell the Abbey. It won't go. No, not till he goes. What's he always a-wandering off abroad for? He don't look happy, to me."

"He's had a deal of sorrow, though he's so young," said Fletcher.

"He won't know no less till he's home for good," was old Joe's response, as the valet went on his way. Those words remained long in Fletcher's memory.

"No letters, my Lord."

Byron wandered about the grounds that evening and about the Abbey, thinking over his plans. He came to a stop outside the Chapel door. An odd fancy seized him and he sent for the keys, went back and let himself into the little place hallowed by the prayers of the monks of old and his own ancestors.

Time had dimmed but not effaced the beauty of the blue stencilled walls, dotted with innumerable gold stars. The charm and sweetness of the place stole on his soul and he sat down there, gazing at the altar. Visions of Mary standing there by his side, rose before his eyes. How divine her dark loveliness would have been in such a setting! It was here he had hoped and dreamed in boyhood of bringing her as a bride. He found himself praying that he might have strength to fight down his wild passions and desires, that so often overpowered him. Life, he felt now, could be pure and sweet. There was no need for this feverish waste of one's higher forces. His own past saddened him.

"I've done with it all, from this hour," he said aloud. There was no gloom here, no shadows to oppress him. The floor, the walls and ceiling were one harmonious tenderness of gentle colour. The stars pleased him most.

"Beloved, this is your bower, my morning star!"

She had always been that to him. Another name, chosen in an hour of inspiration, was "Astarte," one of his favourite Greek heroines, a powerful divinity of Syria, whose temple he had seen on his travels. He had seen, also, a picture of the goddess with one hand stretched forward, and holding in the other a crooked staff in the form of a cross. Mary had borne her cross too long.

These and other thoughts floated through his mind. He rose, went into the grounds, gathered some wild flowers and red autumn leaves and laid them on the altar, lingered a little while longer and then slowly walked away, turning at the door to look once more.

Next morning there was still no message. He ordered his horse, mounted and rode away at a gallop over the fields and hills of Annesley. When he came to Diadem Hill he reined in his horse and paused awhile.

The shades of autumn transformed the surrounding country into one vast bower of rich loveliness. Overhead birds were singing, and far away in the distance there was a shrill sighing as the wind softly stirred the trees and ran, like ripples, through the tall grasses.

"It is autumn, indeed, for us, beloved," said he to himself. They had passed the spring of their lives apart. The summer had been barren for both of them. But now they were nearing their maturity. This was the best time of all. Byron loved the deep, rich tints of this season. They always recalled the glories of the East. The spell of his travels there had never been forgotten.

All at once a sound broke on his ears and made him start, bringing him back to realities. Outside a cottage, not far away, a dog was howling. He watched a bent old woman with a tear-stained face come out and drive the animal away, then look up at the windows, throw up her hands as if in despair, and finally shuffle back again. The dog crept back, and lying down outside the door howled again, dismally.

"Oh, God, how horrible!" thought Byron. "The spectre of Death is coming to that place. Here, in the midst of beauty; sorrow and darkness."

"Why, why," he thought, "even in the midst of nature's loveliness, should these phantoms haunt men's lives?"

With an effort he flung the idea away and urged his horse on into a gallop. Annesley Hall at last! He dismounted

slowly and rang the bell. For some time no one answered. Presently the door was unbolted and an old servant, Nan by name, stood before him.

"Ah, Nan. Is Mrs. Musters at home?" he asked, with affected lightness. "Will you let her know that I am here and would like to see her?"

There was no invitation to enter. The woman peered at him, made no attempt to move, and to Byron's anger seemed inclined to close the door again.

"What does this mean?" he asked sharply. "Kindly take my message at once."

"Mrs. Musters is ill," mumbled Nan.

"Good God!" he cried; then checked himself. "Please let me see someone. I insist."

"She's too ill. That's all I know." She stepped inside as if to close the door, when he settled the matter by walking in.

"Mrs. Musters would never permit you to leave me here like this," he said firmly. "Kindly go up and tell her that Lord Byron is here."

He suspected this to be a trick and that Mary was being kept a prisoner in her own home. He intended to have no subterfuge.

Nan shut the door and went upstairs. He was left alone in the hall for some time. At last she returned and said Mrs. Clarke would see him. Byron's anger gave way to fear and bewilderment. Was Mary ill? If so, how long? Could he have access to her? Had she been like this for the past three weeks?

The room into which he was shown was the same in which they had met on that memorable night.

The portrait of William Chaworth seemed to smile at him, ironically. He had a curious sense of not being alone in the room.

"Oh, not on her! Not on her!" he said, as if in answer to someone who had spoken. The old boyish horror of that picture returned to him for an instant. He remembered again, vividly, the first time he had heard the story of the murder. His mother had taken him, a shy, nervous youth, to Annesley Hall. Mary's face had flashed across his vision. He had scarcely realized what had happened, but he spoke of her beauty.

"Oh, you needn't begin to rave about Mary Chaworth," Mrs. Byron had said, with her usual coarseness. She's not

likely to think of a Byron. You saw that picture in the room? Well, your uncle killed William Chaworth. It isn't likely Mrs. Chaworth would accept you as a suitor."

His mother's taunts had always stirred him. But the awful wound she had, unwittingly, dealt his young heart remained unhealed throughout his life. He had always retained a fear of the dead man. Would he come between them now? he asked himself. Why was there always some barrier when they came together? What did it mean?

As he turned sharply, Mrs. Clarke was standing in the room looking at him. He had not heard her open the door. How long she had been there he could not guess.

He bowed.

"I understand that you desire to see my daughter?" said she. "She is ill."

She did not ask him to be seated. There was no welcome in her tone. Her eyes looked him through and through.

"What is it? Is it serious?" he forced himself to speak.

"I do not know." Her cold tone roused his anger.

"You don't know, Mrs. Clarke? What do you mean by that?"

"When a daughter bars the room to her own mother, it is scarcely likely that the nature of her illness can be known."

It suddenly occurred to Byron that Mary was playing a part—trying to gain time for her own preparations. There was a hostility in Mrs. Clarke's attitude towards him that made him curious.

"Mrs. Musters has suffered so terribly in the past, it is not surprising that her health is delicate," he answered. "But, as an old friend and neighbour, it is my natural desire to know that she is being well cared for. The cause of her distresses is, I assure you, only too well known."

This was directed full at Mrs. Clarke, who reddened at his words.

"Are they, indeed?" she replied. "To you, perhaps, but not to me. And I must beg you to remember that my claim on Mary's confidence is paramount."

"She gave it to you once before. The result was not happy."

"Lord Byron, how dare you!" she cried.

He faced her, saying, "Mrs. Clarke, are you keeping Mrs. Musters a prisoner in her own house?"

"I deny your right to ask such a question," cried she.

" Then kindly take her a message from me," said he, very quietly.

" And bring further suspicion on her good name ? "

" May I ask you to explain those words ? " he asked firmly. " Understand once for all, Mrs. Clarke, that I know you are a partisan of Mr. Musters. Yes, you would send Mary back to Colwick Hall. Your one care is your family name, not her own happiness. Therefore, since Musters' cruelty is common talk, I as her friend have a right to ask for some assurance that no pressure is now being put on her, that her illness is not due to more unnecessary suffering inflicted by her friends. Even her mother has no right to interfere in her life any longer. *You are happy in your second marriage.*"

" *No right, but you have, I suppose?* You, who come over here time after time in my absence, making the servants talk of her ! You, who have so little regard for her position as the wife of John Musters ! She is still his wife, remember. You can dare to speak to me like this ! Oh, I blame myself for going away. Now I return to find her changed to me. I have no share in her life ; she shuts herself in her room with the child, and when she is ill the doctor is admitted but not her own mother."

She spoke bitterly, looking at him with flashing eyes and drawn, thin lips.

" I did not come here to quarrel with you, Mrs. Clarke. I came to see your daughter. She is ill ; well, I am answered."

He turned to go. Something must be done. He must get some message through to Mary. Here she was evidently watched and surrounded by enemies to both of them.

" No doubt she will write to you," said Mrs. Clarke coldly. " As to her malady, her mind will never be at rest until she once more returns to her duty as a wife. No woman can expect peace of mind when she neglects her vow."

Byron's temper rose. He longed to blaze out at this prim, hard woman who prated so glibly of Mary's bondage. But he knew it was hopeless. Pride of race was the fetish to which Mary had been sacrificed too long. His one desire now was to plan out their meeting.

" I will not detain you."

Mrs. Clarke moved to the door to intimate that the interview was over. In another second he was alone.

He limped slowly down the stairs. Nan was at the door.

She opened it. He passed out, mounted his horse and rode like one possessed.

As he passed Diadem Hill, the dog was still howling outside the cottage. The wail pursued him ; he heard it all the way.

That night he wrote to his half-sister and confidant, the Hon. Augusta Leigh.

His letter brought the tears to her eyes. It was just one more impetuous appeal from the brother who had been dear to her from childhood.

" DEAREST GOOSE,

" For God's sake come to Newstead if you can. I am in great trouble. Mary is ill. Her mother home again and trying to part us. If Colonel Leigh can spare you, don't fail me."

So, on the evening of the third day after this epistle was posted, a carriage drove up at Newstead Abbey, and a tall, dark-haired slender lady alighted and almost ran into the hall where Byron was waiting to receive her.

Her sweet, womanly ways and gentle influence over her brother, her capacity, in olden times, for smoothing down the friction that had existed between him and his mother, and her bright, happy nature brought a ray of sunshine into the old place whenever she came on a visit.

" God bless you, dear ! I knew you wouldn't fail me ! " said Byron, and kissing her, led her upstairs.

No, she had never failed him. She was one of those born to be great mothers or great sisters. True, brave, and only thinking of others.

He, on his part, had grown to reverence and love her as a true type of ideal woman. Robbed of maternal affection, he enshrined Augusta in his heart. They had much of the same impulsive temperament. Both adored Newstead Abbey and clung to their ancestral home with an affection as strong as it was curious, for neither of them had been brought up in the place. As old Joe Murray would have expressed it, " They both belonged to it."

She walked beside him now, talking brightly.

" Now, Byron, my dear, I'll just change my dress and then you must tell me everything."

" I've ordered tea. Is that right ? " asked he.

" Of course it is. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

She turned away in the direction of her own room and he

went to the sitting-room, giving strict instructions that the tea must be hot.

That particular beverage was one of Augusta's special weaknesses.

"I hope you are going to join me, dear?" said she, on her reappearance, surveying the plates of cake and toast that old Murray was bringing in.

Byron smiled and refused. She saw his nerves were strung up to a tension and did not press food on him. When the table was cleared and they were alone, he sat before the fire, staring into the flames, and became very silent.

At last she laid a hand on his arm.

"Byron, is poor Mary very ill?"

"I don't believe she is ill at all!" he burst out. "It's a plot to separate us again." He started up. "Goose, Mrs. Clarke is going to try and force her to go back to Colwick Hall. I swear I'll challenge Musters if she does."

"No, no. Don't jump to conclusions. You know nothing, really. That won't help Mary. We must get into communication with her at once."

"I went. I was not allowed to see her. Her mother was as cold as ice. I believe she hates me."

He limped up and down the room. Augusta watched him and sat, deep in thought.

"Byron, dear, won't you sit down and tell me everything quietly? I've had nothing but a few lines from you. Come along. When did you last see Mary? What has happened all these weeks? I thought you were going abroad quite soon?"

She soothed him, and at last he returned to his chair. Sitting down, he gave her a fairly lucid account of events.

"Her letters stopped three weeks ago?" repeated his sister. "That points to her being unable to post you any. Someone may have intercepted yours. Byron, do you think the news of your visits to Annesley has reached Musters?"

"What the hell has it got to do with him, anyway?"

"My dear!"

"I'm sorry, Goose. Only, you know what I mean, don't you? There he is, at Colwick Hall, living with some loose woman, actually expecting Mary to go on staying there, trying to break her heart and kill her. What right has he to interfere now?"

"None at all. But the simplest way is for me to go and see

her at once. No one knows me at Annesley. I will try to see Mary by some means."

"What, now?"

"Why not?" said she, smiling.

"But you are tired after your journey?"

"Do I look tired?" She rose. "Byron, kindly ring the bell and order the carriage. Order dinner for three, and we'll have Mary over here to-night, if I can manage it."

He rose and went to her.

"What a woman you are! A true Byron. So you're going to carry her off in face of the enemy? Shall I come with you?"

"No. You stay here and possess your soul in patience, my child, and leave this to me."

Byron's eyes shone. His depression vanished, and he roused himself. When Augusta took a hand in things it made all the difference in the world for him.

"Now don't expect too much. If Mary is really ill, of course, I may not even see her. But if I do I may persuade her to come."

"Why should she ever go back to Annesley again?" said he.

She smiled and got into the carriage. With a beating heart he watched it drive away.

Then he hurried back, ordered more flowers to be brought in, dinner to be laid upstairs, and paced about the Abbey, too restless and nervous to do anything else.

Augusta was busy thinking out her plans as she drove along. It would be best to stop the carriage a little way from the Hall, and walk through the grounds. It might be recognized. Mary's flight must be precipitated now at all costs. There must be no repetition of the last tragedy. Her return to Colwick Hall had only brought fresh misery on herself and Byron.

A quarter of an hour later Augusta was walking through the great gates and up towards the terrace. It was almost dark. No one could see her from the house. All the better.

As she approached the steps, she saw, leaning against the balustrade, a tall, graceful figure.

"Can I see Mrs. Musters?" she said. The lady turned.

"You want to speak to me?" It was Mary herself. Augusta knew her at once from Byron's description. She drew back in amazement.

" A poet's dream ! No wonder he loves her so," was her first thought. In the twilight the pale, ethereal loveliness of that sweet face sent a thrill through the warm-hearted woman.

" I am Mrs. Musters. But who are you ? " said Mary doubtfully.

Augusta went to her, put her arms round her and kissed her.

" I am your dear Byron's sister. I have come to help you. He is waiting for you."

Mary glanced round quickly.

" Where is he ? Is he here ? " Her tone implied a dread. Augusta's heart sank a little.

" No, he is at Newstead. Mary, he is so distressed. Did you receive his letters ? Have you been ill ? He tells me that your mother saw him and would not even take you a message."

" When did he call ? No one told me. Oh, what did she say to him ? "

" Don't look so frightened. There is nothing to fear. Everything is arranged for your flight."

Mary turned away, crying " Oh, my God ! " and covered her face with her hands.

In an instant Augusta's arms were around her.

" Sister—for you are that to me now—listen. You must take courage in both hands. Do you want to risk more unhappiness ? Mary, you are not going to refuse Byron now, after all that has passed ? "

" After all that has passed ! " said Mary tonelessly, and shuddered.

" You are ill, sick, despondent. This is the result of your mother's unkindness. Come back with me to the Abbey. Byron is waiting for you. The carriage is just outside the gates. Come now ! "

Augusta's one idea was to bring Byron face to face with this trembling woman. He alone could soothe her fears. She had heard the story of that wretched time when Mary had been drawn back after pledging her word to Byron. What would another disappointment mean to him ? And for Mary Musters she foresaw Colwick Hall and fresh unhappiness.

She drew her towards the steps.

" Come now, if only for a few hours."

Suddenly Mary swayed.

" Augusta, not yet. Oh, I must speak ! Where can we go ?

Upstairs, in my room. Don't say any more, only come with me. I want a friend so much!"

In deep perplexity Augusta yielded to her and the two went upstairs. Mary pointed the way. They passed through the room where the famous Chaworth portrait hung. Augusta glanced up at it with interest, but Mary looked away quickly and hurried past it. Leading the way, she ascended the stairs.

"What is the matter, is anyone at home? Are you frightened, Mary?" whispered Augusta. A shake of the head was the only reply. There was terror in the large eyes that glanced round the corridor. They reached and entered a large bedroom.

"Lock the door, please," said Mary faintly, and sank down on the sofa. Augusta did as she wished and then took her place beside her.

"We must not wait too long. The carriage is outside. You will come with me?" she said, coaxingly. "Now, tell me about your troubles. I am sure I can help you."

Mary sat wringing her hands together and looking away.

"My dear, there is no need for all this distress, I am sure. Do not lose your courage. Are you still afraid of your mother or your husband?"

"No. I am afraid of God."

"This is the result of your loneliness."

"I have only myself to blame," answered the poor soul wearily. "The sin is mine. I called Byron back to me. He would not have come otherwise. He told me so. I brought him back to my side."

"And rightly," cried his sister.

Mary went on talking as if unconscious of a listener.

"Oh, I was mad with longing—sick with my misery. I loved him. It was all so wonderful, and then. . . . Why does love bring so much suffering? I want to be happy, to make him so."

"You will, you will, Mary. Don't give way to despair. The future is full of promise. Forget the past."

"I can't, I can't. I am still held down. There is no future for me now. My husband has heard of Byron's visits here. He was always jealous of him before our marriage, and he wants me to go back to Colwick Hall. He has sent me a letter, swears he will divorce me, but if ever I disgrace his name I may

live as a wanton. Everyone shall know it, and I shall never see my little child again."

She broke into a torrent of weeping. Byron's sister held the poor shaking form in her arms and tried in vain to comfort her. The cruelty of the whole affair, the callous disregard of Mary's injuries at his hands, the torture of having to go back to such a mockery of marriage filled Augusta with anger. She resolved to make every effort to save Mary for her own sake and Byron's.

"It is impossible, monstrous. You must never dream of it. Byron will compel Musters to release you. His conduct is too well known already. Mary, don't cry so, dear. For heaven's sake, be brave! We will help you. Don't you trust Byron? He loves you so."

Mary raised a tear-stained face. Her lips were twisting with agony.

"That is not the worst. Oh, can't you guess? The child that is coming . . . Byron's child. It can never bear his name. It will be born out of wedlock. Augusta, I nearly went mad the night I knew. It's true, it's true! What shall I do? Everyone will know."

Time passed, and the two sat there in the gloom. Mary rocking to and fro and moaning pitifully; Augusta's tears fell in sympathy.

"Byron must know at once," she whispered. "Come with me to Newstead. You can stay the night—say you have been with friends. Does your mother know? Is she keeping you a prisoner?"

Mary shook her head. "No, she is out to-night." Augusta rose.

"Quick, dear. Where is your cloak? It's only a little way through the grounds. Come now."

She found a wrap, put it round the helpless figure and raised her up. Mary was as passive as a child. She suffered the quick hands to envelop her in a dark garment, and the two stole down the stairs together, out into the grounds, and found the carriage waiting.

On the journey Mary lay as if asleep, with her eyes closed and her head against Augusta's shoulder.

"Here we are, dear. This is Newstead. Look up."

She started, sat up, and looked through the carriage window. The old Abbey stood up, dark and frowning, throwing its great walls into relief against the sky. Bats were flitting

round and away among the trees. Owls were hooting in the branches.

Mary suddenly clung to Augusta and hid her face.

"It frightens me. I am afraid!" she said.

And thus she passed across the threshold of Newstead Abbey that should have been her bridal home.

CHAPTER TEN

The season of 1814 proved to be one of the most brilliant London had known. Abroad—Napoleon Bonaparte was now hastening to his downfall, and excitement was rife in town. Lavish entertainments were, in consequence, the order of the day.

Byron's return to town created quite a stir.

His new poem, "The Bride of Abydos," had just been published. It had been preceded by "The Corsair." Both created an immense sensation in the press. The papers once more bestirred themselves to record their approval, and incidentally to insert little daily paragraphs about Byron's doings.

Hobhouse was delighted. At last, the temperamental one seemed disposed to make the most of his success. He attended all the social functions. Kept himself well in the public eye. But, sad to relate, appeared to plunge into a series of flirtations. Once again the discreet Hobhouse grew anxious.

Lady Oxford and Lady Frances Webster, both married women of considerable importance, now vied with each other in their endeavour to capture Byron. He flirted shamefully with both by turns. This aroused the fierce anger of Caroline Lamb. She commenced a series of menacing letters.

"Beware, you are driving me to desperation. Fear a woman scorned! Byron, I will not answer for myself," she wrote.

He laughed, and ignored her. More letters. More scenes at her own home. More quarrels with Lord Melbourne. Her relations were at their wits' end to calm her.

And all the while, Byron was playing his part to perfection. He was quite aware that the rumours regarding his amours were reaching the ears of John Musters. There was method in this latest madness.

Mary had definitely refused to return to Colwick Hall. She had also left Annesley, and her husband could not discover

where she had gone. Her mother, Mrs. Clarke, could give him no information or help.

"I much regret Mary's continued hostility to you," she wrote. "But I am now married again with my own home affairs, and I cannot be responsible for her. The child is staying with friends. Wait a little while. Her mood may change," and more to the same purpose.

Meanwhile, far away, in a remote house in Hastings, tended by Augusta Leigh, Mary was now awaiting her dreaded ordeal. The child would soon be born. Byron lived in a conflict of emotions. His child and Mary's! That tie would clear the way now. Nothing could ever part them again. Augusta sent constant news of the invalid.

"Dearest Byron," she wrote. "Our poor Mary is very depressed and anxious. She begs you to remain in town. She fears that Musters may make some attempt to force her to return if he can discover where she is. She will have to have a long rest before she is ready to travel abroad. Her nerves are in a terrible state."

The possibility of Musters' discovering the truth and sending him a challenge was uppermost in Byron's thoughts. But for the effect on Mary, he would have welcomed it. Outwardly he lived in the same languid indifferent manner, wearing his mask for the benefit of Society. But he was really in a fever of excitement. He had woven much of his own emotion into the two last poems, and now wrote to Mr. John Murray to suppress them. Mr. Murray remonstrated.

"My dear Lord Byron, such a course would be a disaster," he wrote back, "your fame is now at its height." It then dawned on Byron that the suppression of these poems might arouse the very curiosity he desired to avoid.

Meanwhile, the idle and scandalous were greatly edified by the new flirtations. The two ladies in question much delighted at their conquest, each supposing she was the object of a "grande passion."

Lady Melbourne, to her vexation, saw little of him, and thought she knew the reason why. She wrote entreating him him at least to keep up his correspondence with her.

"Don't forget that you have a society mother, and neglect her for the sake of a mad little fool like Caroline." Byron replied:

"So long as she remains at Melbourne House I cannot come, but my esteem for you, dear friend, is as warm as ever."

She once more became his confidant, and was filled with anxiety when she learnt the progress of his old love affair.

"You are mad, both of you," she wrote. As for your A—— I blame her entirely. No woman has the right to endanger a man's career, and from what I know of Mary Chaworth-Musters, the stain on her name will end in tragedy. But if, after having ruined her you cannot marry her, well, I repeat again, it will be a crime for which there is no forgiveness in this world or the next."

Byron's answer was very emphatic.

"My dear Lady Melbourne. My A—— never realized her peril till too late. She is an entirely pure and lovable woman. You know it! As to your fears of our relationship—Do not other cousins mate?" Then he went on to discuss Isabella Milbanke and her letters, which had become very frequent of late.

"Your niece is a demure little Puritan. Hobhouse swears she is in love with me. Now, don't encourage her folly. There will be no other wife for me but Mary. That is decided. By the way, more frantic letters from Caroline! Let her do her worst!"

A growing disgust of society life was creeping over Byron. Its shame repelled him. He longed for freedom and nature. Solitude lured him away from the crowd. The thought of Mary Musters as his wife thrilled him with new inspiration. Once away—out in Italy, Greece—and he would give the world some work worth having.

One day, moved to intense anger by the Regent's brutal conduct to his daughter (he had openly insulted the girl whose only fault was devotion to her mother, the luckless Princess of Wales), Byron wrote a stinging rebuke. It was very brief. In four lines—but it set Society talking.

"Weep, daughter of a royal line."

But every paper opened an attack on the poet for having dared to speak the truth about the heir apparent.

Hobhouse called round at the Albany, and showed Byron some violent attacks on himself.

"For the love of heaven," he concluded, "leave this sort of thing to disappointed hacks like Leigh Hunt. Do you realize the danger to your own fame? The press are not to be trifled with. One turn against you and down you would come."

"Be damned to the press! I refuse to play the sycophant to the Prince of Wales or any man," was Byron's retort.

"Byron, you cannot afford to make enemies."

"I have never written yet for praise or patronage," replied the latter. "I refuse to start now. I write what I feel to be true, and I intend to continue."

His friend sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it does not matter, anyway," cried Byron. "I shall be out of England soon. I want to live a free, natural life. Do you know, Hobby, I feel gagged here? I get sick of people. There's a blight on this London of ours."

Hobhouse looked at him affectionately.

"You're made for more elemental surroundings," he replied. "I realized that when we were abroad together. Yes, you are right to go away. I am not sure you will lose much."

"Lose!" echoed Byron. "I gain everything." The other turned away in silence. Then Byron rose, and limped over to him, and put his hand on his shoulder.

"You're my real loss," he said tenderly. "Hobby, how I wish you could come with us."

"Yes, I always seem to be losing you," answered Hobhouse, sadly; "still, if it's for your real happiness, I must not be selfish."

"We shall return, of course, when Mary is my wife. Once all this trouble is settled, and the divorce is over, there will be no need to stay away."

"No, of course not. But why on earth are you flirting with Lady Frances Webster and Lady Oxford? Isn't it a bit absurd?" asked Hobhouse.

"So are you," was the unexpected response. "How else am I to throw Musters off the scent? He is waiting his chance to drag poor Mary's name in the dust to cover his own doings."

"But he never comes to town."

"No, perhaps not," answered Byron, laughing, "but his friends do. It's a small world. Beau Brummel met Musters, and that gentleman informed him he was only waiting for proof to divorce his wife. He had only spared her till now for the sake of the child."

"Then Musters knows," cried Hobhouse, startled.

"No, he thinks he does. Oh, I assure you, he gave Brummel a most pathetic account of his domestic troubles. Oh, yes, he's a very ill-used man by all accounts."

" Scandalous, after the life he led his wife at Colwick Hall."

" No matter. By the way," added Byron, " heard the latest ? The Beau and the Regent have fallen out. For good, I believe."

" Well, Brummel is only a parvenu, anyway."

Byron shook his head.

" I don't agree. He set out to be a dandy. He succeeded. And Brummel has reformed our dress for many a year. He taught the Regent all he knows about it. Of course, it's pretty obvious that the real reason is simply Mrs. Fitzherbert. Brummel never would toady to her, and he was always very polite to the Princess of Wales."

" Well, he's finished for good," answered Hobhouse. " Once the Regent cuts any man, he may as well quit society. After all, he is our future King."

" While poor Brummel may go to the devil, and starve," replied Byron. " Oh, what a set it is to live in ! Poor devil, he had to live beyond his income to keep in with the Prince's set. And who sets the pace ? Why, the Regent. Now Brummel will have to fly the country to keep out of a debtor's prison for the rest of his life. That's the future for him and all discarded favourites. It's a form of slavery."

" Let's drop the subject. You and I cannot help it," was the response. Where are you going to-night ? "

Byron rose, and threw down some papers.

" Hobby, I'm going, my friend, to a place where I can study life stripped of all its illusions If you want to see a real bit of human nature, come with me to the Wolf Club, and see Edmund Kean . . . off the stage."

" No, thank you."

" Why not ? Surely actors are entitled to be natural beings sometimes ? "

Hobhouse frowned.

" Kean's vagaries are too well known to be inviting," he said ; " and as to hunting him up in one of those low haunts he is so fond of, Byron, is it quite the thing for you to do ? "

" In my capacity as one of the Directors of Drury Lane, it is." Byron was very emphatic on that point, and looked serious. He added :

" Poor old Kean is going to the devil at a breakneck speed. I have just heard of a new move by the Committee to cancel his engagement, and get a new man in his place. I voted it

down, but I want to put him on his guard, if I can. He's too great an artist to lose."

"My dear Byron, Kean plays with his chances. Lord Essex was telling me about him the other night. Ever since he made his name in London, he has been drinking, buffooning with all sorts of low creatures, breaks engagements to go to social gatherings where he is invited, and upsets people generally."

"Granted. Let's look at the cause. Hobby, do these men, like Essex and Holland, know what it is to starve as poor Kean has done? Do they realize the wearing misery of waiting years for a chance? Getting it when the best part of one's strength has been spent in the fighting. As to his drinking: God help him, for I believe that habit grew when he was in the depths of misery, and it's easier to fight the enemy without than the devil within. I know that myself. Anyway, little Kean saved Drury Lane from ruin as the Committee might remember. By jove, the day he came up to see us for his engagement he showed some spirit!"

"You were there?"

"Yes, and those dunderheads would have let him slip out of our hands. You should have seen them sitting round like so many owls. In comes Kean, pinched, shabby and, I dare say, starving. They kept him waiting an hour, Hobby, would you believe it, while they argued, before his face, mind you, whether 'Mr. Kean was the right and fitting person to represent them on the . . . er . . . classic boards of Drury Lane.'" Byron imitated Lord Essex to the life.

"Rather hard lines on Kean," commented Hobhouse.

"Sheer cruelty," answered Byron. "Then one of them had a brilliant notion. To ask Kean to recite!"

"Did he?"

"No! Why should he?" Byron's eyes flashed. "Kean had toured the provinces for years, and had every part in Shakespeare at his fingers' ends. Oh, he gave them a recital, but not quite in the way they expected! He walked up to the table, brought his fist down on it with such a bang he made us jump, and thundered out:

"What! I, Edmund Kean, recite to a lot of gentlemen who sit here in judgement on me! Never! If you want to 'assure yourself of my powers' come to the theatre, and witness me there."

"I suppose that caused some trouble?"

Byron shrugged his shoulders.

" Kean was going to walk out of the room, when I stopped him. But the pride of the man! Why, he was on the verge of suicide he told me afterwards, and yet he wouldn't stoop to one of them. I call it magnificent."

" Yes," said Hobhouse, quietly. " But why does he not bring that same pride to bear on himself now ? "

Byron looked at him with a comic despair.

" Hobby, what a damned good schoolmaster you would make! But you don't understand human nature one bit."

The other rose and took up his cloak.

" Perhaps not. I confess it puzzles me sometimes. I must be going. Shall I meet you at Lady Heathcote's to-night ? We're due there."

" Yes, I will look in later on."

Hobhouse departed on his way. Byron sat down to grapple with more fiery letters from Caroline Lamb, and gave it up in despair. Isabella's letters also annoyed him. They were full of prim little hints of affection. Accounts of the moral sentiments she most believed in, and a good deal of flattery regarding Byron's poems.

His thoughts wandered away to Hastings. How would Mary get through her ordeal . . . the suspense of waiting was terrible. In the absence of any definite tidings, he decided to go out.

On his arrival at Lady Heathcote's, he found the rooms full of the usual excited crowd. The ladies greeted him effusively. He was captured at last by Lady Frances Webster, a dark, slim, soulful creature with a languishing voice and manner. She gazed into his face ecstatically, and asked him to leave the dancers and come into " some quiet nook." He assented.

Once alone, she asked him in thrilling whispers : " Was the story true ? She had read the ' Bride of Abydos ' founded on history. It had haunted her ever since she had read it. But, alas, the *tête-à-tête* was interrupted by the arrival of her husband, Sir James Wedderburn Webster, a small, queer little man, who amused everyone by following his wife wherever she went, darting after her like a little bird, wearing a perpetual and inane smile, and singing her praises. To all intents and purposes he lived for nothing else.

So onlookers followed, and a little circle gathered around them.

" Lord Byron, your poem has touched my soul," murmured

Lady Frances. Then she suddenly stood up, struck an attitude, and to Byron's dismay, commenced to recite some of the verses. No one noted that Caroline Lamb had joined the party, and stood behind listening to the proceedings.

> "Within the place of a thousand tombs
> They shine beneath, while dark above,
> The sad but living cypress glooms
> And withers not . . . and withers not. . . ."

Here the reciter broke down, and looked imploringly at the Author for help. Byron shook his head.

"And withers not through branch and grief," declaimed the lady. Here, a shrill, small voice interposed.

"'And withers not through branch and leaf,' my dearest life. I assure you it is leaf."

It was Webster, who had seated himself within a few paces of his wife, and now produced a scrap of paper, waving it in the air.

"James, be quiet," said Lady Frances, darting a withering glance at him.

"My soul, I heard you this morning, and jotted down some of the lines to help you."

A loud tittering broke out. One look from Byron stayed it. He stepped forward, and said very kindly:

"My dear Lady Frances, I wish I could help you, but the fact is I have forgotten the verse myself."

"Doesn't she recite to perfection? My wife is an angel," said little Webster to the audience. No one contradicted him, and Lady Frances smiled condescendingly, and then made a fresh start.

"Like an early unrequited love"—

She had barely uttered the words, when a wild laugh from the back startled all present. In another minute, Caroline Lamb had darted through the circle, and pushed her way to the front. Then rushed to Byron, and clasping her hands, cried out,—

"False! false to me!" Ah, can you listen to those words from another's lips, and not quail at your own treachery?"

Women tittered behind their fans. Men turned away and shrugged their shoulders. Byron's face flushed. He turned to Lady Frances:

"I must apologize most sincerely to you, Lady Frances, for this unseemly interruption to your very charming performance. But perhaps you will favour us at another time."

" Byron, how dare you ? How dare you ? " cried Caroline.

" Pray do not heed her, Lord Byron," said Lady Frances, very calmly. Caroline turned on her furiously.

" Oh, you can try to lure him away from me by reciting his poems, but you cannot even remember them. They are imprinted on my heart."

Sir James Webster became frantically excited.

" Ladies and gentlemen, my wife has done nothing. Nothing whatever to offend this lady. She is an angel," he added.

" No one doubts that, Sir James," said Byron, with great courtesy. He led the lady away out of the throng, followed by the faithful partner of her joys and sorrows. Webster darted away to the supper room, and Byron found himself alone with Lady Frances.

" It is too good of you not to mind," said Byron. " I fear that Lady Caroline Lamb is mad."

Lady Frances sighed.

" I can pity and forgive her," she replied.

" That is very generous of you," he answered. Then talked to her of his travels in Turkey. She had never seen the East, and was fascinated by his descriptions of the minarets in the sunset.

" I can often hear the voice of that man calling the people to prayer," concluded Byron.

Lady Frances started and looked around.

" Oh, Lord Byron," she ejaculated.

" It's all right. We have escaped the enemy ! " She amazed him by falling on her knees and seizing his hand.

" Listen ! " she cried. " Let me tell you the secret of my life. Lord Byron, I worship you ! I adore you ! I give myself to you ! Now do with me as you will ! I have told you all ! "

Accustomed as he was to adoration, Byron was startled beyond words. He rose, and endeavoured to lift her to her feet, but she resisted him, and sank down in a heap at his feet for all the world like an Eastern slave. Then looked up with burning eyes.

" I am yours, yours ! " she whispered.

The latent devil in his passionate nature leapt up within him. He felt the blood rush to his temples. Here was a woman, and a beautiful one, to be had for the asking. Few of her sex ever realize what a strain they put on a man's

self-control when they lose their own. They play with fire, and then shrink back when the flame scorches them. Byron realized the truth. Lady Frances was sincere enough. It was not love but a sudden passion that had swept over her ardent nature. The magic of his work had sown the seed of mischief. He scarcely realized also that his own personal beauty had completed the conquest. He remained silent, looking down at her with tenderness.

"Oh, you are not offended," she cried, and the tears streamed down her cheeks. Say you will forgive. Forget all I have said."

He smiled rather sadly.

"I am never offended at genuine feeling," he replied. Then he raised her from her knees; this time without hindrance. She no longer resisted, but sank down on a chair and looked away.

Byron spoke in that deep musical voice that had thrilled so many listeners.

"This is playing with fire, my dear friend," he said kindly. I shall cease to be proud of my poetry if it inspires such feelings in gentle minds and spoils happy friendships. Let us forget this. We are apt in moments of impulse to speak rashly."

Then he talked to her gently of herself. "Your love of poetry carries you away," he added. His one desire was to spare her feelings and restore her to herself. He blamed himself for having flirted with her. But he had never dreamed she had taken it seriously.

"I thought we had agreed that our little talks were merely pastime," he reminded her.

Lady Frances nodded and wiped her eyes.

"I really do not know what came over me," she said, trying to smile.

"It's just a way things have," said Byron. "But if we knew how transient these impulses are, we need never worry about them."

Lady Frances was really a very charming and intellectual woman. There was none of the vanity and pettymindness of Caroline Lamb about her. Byron was too much a creature of impulse himself to judge others harshly.

"After all, women have their temptations and struggles as well as men," he thought.

"Oh, what must you think of me?" she cried.

" My dear Lady Frances, how should I think of you, except with very deep esteem and gratitude ? I value your friendship and to me that tie is a very sacred one indeed. People will only allow depth to passion and love. Yet I often feel that the flowers of friendship last long after the others have withered."

" Mine will always last for you—I mean my friendship,—Lord Byron," she said, quickly. " Come, take me back to the ball-room, and let me forget my folly."

He rose, and offered her his arm.

" It only shows how very real our friendship is when we can resume it so readily," said Byron, with a smile, and they made their way back to the ball-room.

Lady Frances was claimed by a partner, and Byron wandered into an ante-room. The first person he saw was Sir James Webster sitting in a deep armchair, which had the effect of making him look like a very small boy. He was reading a letter.

" How is this, Webster ? Not dancing ! " said Byron, lightly. The little man clutched his epistle, glanced around darkly, and rising, made one bound towards him.

" I must go soon, and watch Lady Frances dancing. She is like a goddess. Don't you think so ? "

" She is as graceful as one and, luckily for you, she is a mortal."

Webster drew near, and laid his hand on Byron's arm.

" Whenever you wed . . . and you will one day," he said, " choose such another woman for your mate. If there be such a one in the world. She has but one fault. I name it in confidence to you. Lord Byron, she is all spirit. Passion is utterly unknown to her."

" Really, now ! " said Byron.

" Yes," proceeded Webster. " She dwells ever with the stars ; I leave her to commune with her own soul."

" Why not bear her company sometimes ? " said Byron, waggishly.

" It would be sacrilege. She is enwrapt in chastity as the cold, pale moon," replied Webster.

Byron looked at him.

" Look here, Webster. Do you mind telling me what you are really driving at ? "

Webster laid his head on one side, looked towards the ball-room, and put his fingers to his lips.

"Hush, Lord Byron. You and I are men of the world. We have our passions unfettered."

"Have we?" said Byron. "All right, Webster, go on."

"One cannot always dwell near perfection, and not long for warmth." The little creature laid his hand on his heart.

"I quite agree with you," was the grave reply.

"I knew you would never betray me. This letter is from my Countess. Ah! don't think for a moment I would wrong Lady Frances. But the Countess wants me to fly with her. Now I am a man of tumultuous passions! I am on fire! Of course, the better part of me is yonder, with the dear soul in the ballroom; yet I am lured. Now, Lord Byron, what do you advise?"

"Webster," said Byron, impressively, "do you know what I should be tempted to do in your place?"

Webster looked at Byron in the oddest manner, and darted to and fro, balancing himself on his toes. His smile was so inane that he might have been mad. The other, however, came to the conclusion he was merely a fool.

"Yes. Do you know what I should really do in your place?"

"No! Oh, where are you?" The little man turned round quickly as he spoke, and then stood gaping at him.

Byron limped to the door of the ballroom, and beckoned very solemnly to him.

"If I possessed an angel, I should go and dance with her myself, in case someone else found she had wings and flew away with her."

Webster drew back in deep resentment.

"Do you dare to suggest that Lady Frances . . . ?" he began. Byron interrupted him, sharply.

"Go, and dance with her, my friend, and leave your amorous Countess alone," he said.

Sir James put his hand to his head as if in deep thought, then looked at his adviser.

"You would! You really would. . . . 'Pon my word you are right!" On saying which he vanished like an elf.

"Oh, what fools we mortals be," said Byron, aloud. Then started as Caroline Lamb darted out of a corner, and clutched his arm.

"Byron, how dare you affront me to-night before everyone?" she cried, furiously.

He bowed coldly, and turned away.

" Listen," she said ; " they are playing a waltz. You know that out of consideration for you I gave up dancing. I presume I may waltz to-night." She looked spitefully at his lame foot.

" With the whole roomfull, if you wish," he said, scornfully.

She gave a cry of anger.

" It shall be so ! The Dance of Death ! " she shrieked. In an instant he found himself alone. He shrugged his shoulders, and moved towards the door. Any gathering was sure to be spoilt for him if Caroline Lamb was present. He knew that only too well.

All at once, he heard a loud cry. Then another ! The music stopped ! A babel of voices—and Byron heard the words,—

" Caroline Lamb, dead ! Stabbed herself."

He turned as white as a sheet.

" Lord Byron ! Lord Byron ! What have you done ? "

Lady Heathcote rushed in distractedly. " I'll never forgive you ! You have driven her to her death ! " She darted away. He felt a gentle hand on his arm.

" Don't worry, Lord Byron," said Lady Frances. " I will go and make inquiries. I don't think it is serious."

He followed her to the supper room.

The victim was lying on the floor surrounded by a large crowd of excited ladies. The gentlemen retired discreetly to the other end, while Lady Heathcote bathed the sufferer's head, and helped to undo her dress. Presently in bustled a doctor.

" Room there, please. Give her more air, and get water."

Then he bent down to examine the wound.

There was nothing but the tiniest scratch. A small supper knife had been pressed very gently against the delicate breast.

Caroline was quite conscious as she lay there, and heard him say, in irritation :

" Pray, do not distress yourselves, ladies, it is a mere nothing. She has fainted from fear. That is all ! "

She heard the tittering break out. The murmur of voices around her. Then she moaned, feebly.

" Byron ! he has killed me ! " More titters.

" There ! I told you it was nothing. She has done it to make a scene," whispered Lady Frances to him.

" It shall be the last one, that I vow," muttered Byron, and limped away.

Caroline was determined to carry out the drama to the finish, so she continued to lie limply in the arms of her supporters, and was finally carried to her coach by two stalwart footmen, followed by a little procession of ladies bearing her fan, gloves, veil, etc. Hobhouse, arriving that instant, met them.

"What's wrong? What has happened now?" he inquired of Byron, who was standing in the hall.

"Come in here," replied the latter, leading the way to an adjoining ante-room.

It was a very furious and electric Byron who unbosomed himself to that worthy friend.

"Everybody is mad! London is ruined for me by a damned little fool who is bent on creating as much scandal as she can to annoy me. Of course, to-morrow, Caroline's 'suicide' will be all over the town. I shall write to Lady Melbourne, and tell her I have done with the family, and I shall never enter her house again," concluded Byron.

"My dear fellow, everyone knows Caroline Lamb. It won't do you any harm at all. Where are you going?" said Hobhouse.

"To see Kean. Are you coming?"

"Not yet. Lady Heathcote saw me arrive. I must stay and speak to her."

Hobhouse saw Byron to his carriage, and then returned to his hostess. He found her in a great state of perturbation, her chief anxiety being that Byron had caused a scandal in her house. If people choose to kill themselves let them do it elsewhere. But, of course, she blamed the man who had driven any woman to such an extremity. Hobhouse managed to soothe her.

In the meantime Byron drove on towards the Adelphi. It was some little distance, and he had time to steady his nerves and conquer his furious anger against Caroline. At last the driver pulled up some little way from his destination. The Club in question was situated in Fountain Court, and Byron alighted, and made his way to the tavern, after telling the man to wait for him.

He heard the sounds of men's voices singing in chorus and the clinking of glasses as he approached.

The Wolf Club, which had its headquarters in this inn, "The Coal Hole," was formed of men in the middle and lower walks of life, who gathered there for the purpose of enjoying

themselves as unconventionally as possible. Literary hacks, broken-down artists, actors out of work, rubbed shoulders with members of all sorts of trades. Regular patrons were allowed to bring friends. They did so, with the result that many most disreputable characters hung about the place, and sponged freely on their more opulent brothers.

But those members selected to act as Chairmen were generally of a better standing than the rest.

Byron limped down the steps carefully, and coming to a large door passed inside the tavern. Servants were rushing about with relays of wine. Dinner was over. Inside the room stood a table bearing a pile of empty plates and dishes. Broken fragments of food lay about the supper table.

The room was long and low with a raftered ceiling. The furniture of the plainest. Rough deal tables and benches. A motley group were assembled.

In honour of the guest of the evening, old Jack Bannister had taken the chair. He was the most sober man present. The others lolled on the benches or lay with their arms on the tables, in various stages of intoxication. Some were asleep, others shouting and applauding a small, slim man who was dancing. His back was turned to the door. A few of the company checked their mirth at the appearance of the elegant figure of his Lordship, who leant on his stick watching the curious scene.

" Now then, boys," shouted Edmund Kean, for it was he who was the dancer, " who said I was too drunk to stand ? Bannister, I've won my wager ! Look here ! "

His lithe grace and marvellous agility, as he sprang into the conventional attitude of harlequin, and went through the well-known dance, would have amazed his audience, had they not known that he had played the part a hundred times or more in the past. How often had he thus buffooned in barns and wayside taverns for a meal. Those bitter days of poverty and obscurity had gone. But his limbs retained their flexibility. He sprang into the air and bounded forward like a fawn. Then men cheered him lustily. They thought it a splendid joke.

But to Byron, who had seen Edmund Kean a few nights ago as Othello, and sat spellbound by his incomparable genius and grandeur, this exhibition was pitiable. Here was the greatest tragedian of his age degrading himself to play the

fool for gross minds and vulgar wits to urge him on in his recklessness. He was terribly intoxicated to-night.

As Hobhouse had said, Lord Holland, Lord Essex, and others in Society, had gone out of their way to invite Kean to their houses, and lift him up to the social position for which his great gifts had fitted him. He had often refused their invitations. But they knew well enough where he could be found. Was it any wonder that many of the Drury Lane Committee were losing their patience?

"Now, I'll give you a song," said Kean, pausing at last. "Here, give me some more brandy. I'll sing you, 'On the banks of Ullin waters.'"

"Kean, take it easy for a while," said Bannister.

"Go to hell, Jack!" shouted Kean. "Waiter, bring me some more brandy, and be quick about it!"

Byron advanced into the room.

"Good evening, Mr. Kean! Good evening, gentlemen!"

Edmund Kean swung round at the sound of his voice. The two faced each other. Byron saw the fine expressive face he had admired in "Othello" in all its intellectual fire and feeling, pale and sickly. He noted the glorious dark eyes were now dim, and the firm mouth loose and drooping. The actor looked literally sodden with drink. How he managed to dance, or even keep his balance at all, was a mystery, except that Kean could always do things that were quite impossible to ordinary men.

As Byron had said, the deadly blight of drink had crept over him during the long weary years of waiting. The sickness had eaten into his very soul. Few guessed it as yet. Certainly not the public who yelled itself hoarse night after night, cheering his Shylock, his Hamlet, Richard, and other great parts. They only witnessed the Promethean spark alight. But when the curtain fell, and Kean's superhuman efforts gave way to a terrible reaction, it was then that the grim spectre stole near him, and offered him the cup of relief and oblivion. There were so many things to be forgotten. Hours of gnawing hunger, slights, yearnings and, above all, the grave of a little child.

So poor Kean drank deeper as the days sped on and the hour of his overthrow grew near.

Only the heart of a genius can comprehend a brother's pain. Byron knew the actor's history, pitied and understood. The look of gentle rebuke in his eyes seemed a silent challenge to

Kean. He looked round, and drew himself up with dignity.

"Gentlemen!" he cried, in his deep, thrilling voice, "You have seen me play the Harlequin. But don't forget that Edmund Kean is still the actor."

Then, to the amazement of all, he steadied himself against a chair, and broke out into a recital from one of the scenes of "Othello." He looked straight into Byron's face as he spoke the lines:

> "Reputation! Reputation! Reputation!
> Oh, I have lost the immortal part of me!"

His listeners were as still as death. Kean's voice rose and fell. Every inflexion was perfect. Not a word missing. He knew the play from end to end. But the true significance of his selection escaped all but one. Byron. The latter glanced round at the company.

What an audience for genius to display its powers to! The drunken faces—some sleepy, others almost bestial, with the wine slobbering from their lips down on to their clothes. The close atmosphere of the room with the smell of food from the adjoining kitchen, the disordered tables with broken glasses and half-empty bottles, the sawdust on the floor, trampled and filthy with mud and spilt liquor. All these things suddenly gave Byron a terrible sense of nausea.

Then he lost himself.

He was somewhere else, in another room far away. There was a sound of waters in his ears, lapping, lapping against the wall outside. A mist floated before his eyes. There were forms of men lying about just as they were here, and women singing. The clanging of bells in the town. Church bells. In the midst of the picture he saw a man lying half across a table. It was not Kean. Nor was it the drunken sailor he had rested his gaze upon.

The hair was auburn, mixed with grey, and the hand that hung limp by the man's side had a ring upon it.

The mist faded. He awoke to reality around him. With a start he found himself looking at the second finger of his left hand.

It wore the same ring.

The bell of St. Martin's was chiming the hour.

No one present in the Wolf Club knew why Lord Byron quickly turned away, and stumbled to the door. Old Jack

Bannister—fearful that Kean had offended his Lordship—rose, and hurried after the retreating figure.

"Lord Byron, I'm so sorry. You won't be angry with poor Kean, will you? He'll be quite all right for the play to-morrow. You know his way?"

Byron made no reply. Bannister walked with him down the little passage.

"Sure, he's the maddest fellow alive, but he means no harm," continued the good-hearted Bannister.

Byron raised his stick, and hailed his coach to approach.

"Lord Byron, will you come back and speak to him? I'll get him away from the others into a quiet corner."

"Eh!" Byron looked at him with a start. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Bannister. Yes, all right. Tell Kean to call on me in the morning. Good night."

"By Jove, how ill he looks! The place was too close for him," thought Bannister, as he stepped back on the pavement after the carriage had driven away.

Meanwhile, Byron lay back limp and nerveless. His head was swimming. The rush of cool air revived him. Then the curious feeling of detachment and unreality vanished by the time he reached his rooms.

Hobhouse had called and left a little note. Byron was not to worry. Lady Heathcote quite understood. Byron tossed the note aside, and caught sight of another letter lying on the table, marked "Immediate." It was in Augusta's writing. He tore it open, read it, and gave a cry!

"Mary, beloved, it's over, thank God! Now you are truly mine for all eternity."

Yes, the child was born. A fortnight ago, so his sister wrote. Little Medora, Byron's child, and Mary's.

Early next morning Byron was driving away, forgetful of London, Caroline . . . everything else but this one thing.

"Mary and he would go abroad as soon as she was strong enough."

"My darling, no power on earth can part us now. Medora, my child and yours. Beloved, it is well."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE journey to Hastings occupied the best part of three days. Byron's spirits rose to fever heat as London receded and the fresh spring beauty of fields and hedges came into view. He sank back in the carriage and gave himself up to the thoughts that crowded in on his excited brain.

Mary's child was born. One more link now bound them to each other. The intervening period of misery rolled away. He remembered only the happy hours, the days when he had loved her in secret, when he had first wooed her, grown to understand the happiness of thinking and feeling for her even while she had remained unconscious of his love. He became the boy worshipper once more, scarcely realizing how the years had changed that ideal love to a passion so great, so terribly human, that it had grown into his maturer self. His own wild, elemental nature, too soon set free when he had reached manhood, had tasted of the bitter sweets of unworthy fancies. Many women had lured him with a transient feeling, but none had touched his soul. None except Mary Chaworth. And now Fate, which he had cursed so often for giving her to another, had brought her back to him.

Therefore what had passed between them was ordained. He comforted himself with this reflection. Otherwise he would have regretted that his boyish ideal had merged into manly passion.

He sat up and looked out of the window. The exultation changed to a stern purpose. Dreams were well enough, but they must face realities. Musters had to be reckoned with; the whole prosaic business of securing Mary's freedom, at all costs, some attempt at reconciliation with her family, for her sake. Surely Mrs. Clarke would forgive when she understood?

Ties of blood are strong with most women. He was a pilgrim, a wanderer. Save for Augusta he had no one to care about. But Mary's mother was still dear to her. She must not be robbed of her little daughter to whom she was so

deeply attached ; the child's sunny laugh and sweet face had been so much to her during the wretched years at Colwick Hall.

Then lines from his new poem, "The Giaour," recurred to his mind. He had written his soul into them.

> "The cold in clime are cold in love,
> Their love can scarce deserve the name ;
> But mine was like the lava flood
> That boils in Etna's breast of flame.
> Yes, Love indeed is light from Heaven ;
> A spark of that immortal fire
> With angels shared, by Allah given,
> To lift from earth our low desire."

His passion for Mary had done that indeed. He smiled as he recalled Lady Melbourne's letters of protest. Her warnings that the outcome of it all had been a crime for which there could be no forgiveness. She, like others, made a fetish of the world's opinion. Fame, worldly success, even life itself were well lost for that one hour of rapture when Mary had clung to him and whispered, "I wanted you."

The day wore on, and he was so engrossed with his own thoughts that he scarcely noticed the lights ahead. They were approaching a small village where it would be necessary to break the journey for the night.

"Here's the inn, my Lord. We'd better stay here. I don't see any other place."

He alighted.

"Will the gentleman have dinner in the coffee room?" inquired the waiter, of Byron's coachman. That worthy hurried after his Lordship to find out.

"Oh, tell them to give me a plate of some vegetables and a bottle of wine. Nothing else," was the reply.

Byron lived on a Spartan diet and seldom broke his rule. His meals were a constant source of perplexity to those who did not know his ways.

To his intense relief he found himself the sole inmate of the coffee room when he descended. Sitting down in a corner he took out Augusta's letter and reread it.

"Your little daughter was born a fortnight ago."

The thought struck him that it was strange he should have been kept so long without news. She had added a postscript. He had overlooked it in his hurry.

"I think it would be wiser if you have the carriage put up in the town and ride out to the house. I will explain when I see you."

" What a woman for caution and worries Goose is ! " he thought. " No need of any secrecy now, thank God ! "

A voice outside brought the blood to his face. His hand clutched the table.

" Anyone inside here ? Where's the waiter ? "

It was John Musters. He shouted out his inquiry and then entered the room. Byron was seated with his back to the door. He pulled his cloak round him and sat rigid. He heard the waiter's apologetic voice explaining that dinner was nearly ready, not quite. The usual time was seven.

" Damn your usual time ! Get us something to eat at once," was the retort. Then a woman's voice broke in. " Lor', John, don't hurry them on my account." Musters laughed, flung down his riding whip, and dropped into a seat.

" I'm not doing so, my girl. Riding's thirsty work. Ay, and if you're not ready for a meal, I am. Here, waiter ! hurry up with the wine. All asleep here ! They want waking up a bit."

" Are you staying here the night, sir ? " asked the man, coming back with a tray and commencing to lay the table.

" Yes, my wife and I will stay. Musters is the name. You can book it."

Byron remained as if carved into stone. He scarcely noticed the waiter come to his table a few minutes later and place a dish before him.

" What a meal for a growd man ! No wonder he looks so queer," thought that individual. " Vegetables and nothing else ! Why, it's a meal for a rabbit, not a 'uman being ! "

He bustled off to attend to other customers.

" Ah, this is something like ! " he commented, as he took the Musters' order to the kitchen and returned with a substantial meal of meat and other comestibles, which he set before the two.

" Don't look so glum, John," cried a shrill voice. Musters growled out something about dropping £2000 on a miserable hack.

" Well, didn't I warn you not to bet on Diamond ? " was the lady's reply. " You should have taken my advice."

They fell to discussing the races and other horses.

" You knew the winner. By Jove, Jenny, you're a splendid judge of horseflesh," said Musters.

Much laughter and coarse badinage followed. The pair were too engrossed in their own concerns to notice the silent

figure seated in the farther corner of the room. Byron was gazing into space. His seat faced a long, low mullioned window that looked out into the coach-yard. Men were rubbing down horses, whistling and laughing; women servants clattering in and out of the kitchen and outhouses calling across to them. Dogs were barking and chasing each other round the yard, to the great detriment of the tubs of geranium that stood at the door and around the yard like a row of soldiers.

Byron was unconscious of the stir outside. A terrible fury was taking possession of him. His face was drawn and set.

"I'll just go round and see if we can start later, if you prefer it," said Musters. "A good rest won't do the horses any harm. They were sweating like the devil."

A second later he was outside and crossing the yard. Byron watched him go up and speak to the ostler, pat his horses and give some directions about them.

"Very careful of his animals. He keeps all his brutality for his wife!" The thought added fuel to the fire in Byron's breast.

"Hallo! Fine dogs, these! What's the name of this one?" said Musters, laughing and cracking his whip. He put out his hand to catch the collar of a splendid St. Bernard that lumbered towards him, when he suddenly caught sight of the white face and blazing eyes that were watching him through the casement. The whip dropped out of his hand, his ruddy face paled, and he stood staring back at Byron in astonishment.

The latter never moved; but if the pistols that his Lordship kept near him had been at hand at that moment, there would have been another tragedy in the families of Byron and Chaworth. Luckily it was averted; but the demon of fury had entered Byron's heart. He longed to shoot the insolent bully who stood there gaping at him in obvious dismay.

Musters soon recovered himself, however, and broke into a loud, mocking laugh; made a bow to Byron, and then, with an evil grin turned and made his way back to the coffee room. The waiter was clearing the table.

"Anything more, sir?"

"Yes, you can bring some coffee for my wife," said Musters, with a vicious emphasis on the last words. "See that you wake us no later than nine. Come along, Jenny, we'll take coffee upstairs." In another second Byron found himself alone.

"Why, your dinner's stone cold, sir. Shall I have it heated again?" He came to himself with a start.

"Eh? No—no, thanks," he said hurriedly, and rising, slowly limped out of the room and upstairs.

"Why, he 'ain't eaten a bite," said the waiter, much aggrieved; "and arter all the trouble I took to git 'im a special portion. Lord, what a face! There's summit wrong with that gentleman, or my name's not Bouncer. I 'ope as 'ow 'e ain't one of them!"

He glanced fearfully in the direction of the staircase. It was a coaching inn, and people talked, dreamt and thought highwayman. Every unusual visitor was watched. An elegantly dressed gentleman who ate nothing, looked fierce and seemed absorbed in gloomy reflections was a fit object for suspicion.

"What's he a-doing of now?" asked Mr. Bouncer of the Boots when he met him on the landing with some wine that Byron had rung for.

"Bless me, if I don't believe you're right," said the boy. "Why, he's got two great pistols a-lying on 'is table!"

"Oh, 'as he? Well, you take this tray. I hear No. 14 callin' me!" said Mr. Bouncer, and thrusting the tray into the boy's hands, flew off in the opposite direction. The Boots stood outside Byron's door for quite a long time and listened. Then knocked, deciding to take his life in his hands.

"Come in!" said a languid voice. He entered. The desperado was lying back in an arm chair in a dressing-gown, looking the picture of docile content. He nodded, motioned to the boy to put the tray near him, and told him to knock at his door at seven.

Byron's fury had departed as abruptly as it had risen. A complete revulsion of feeling had come over him. What he had seen had gloriously justified Mary and himself. One more proof, if it was necessary, that they were doing the only right thing. He was glad to have had this fresh demonstration of Musters' unworthiness. So he passed a restless but happy night and was down in the coffee room by eight o'clock. There was no sign of the couple who had slept in the room not far from his own, and he gave orders to the coachman to make ready as quickly as possible.

The little waiter was unspeakably relieved at his reappearance. He had communicated his fears, in confidence, to the entire staff, with warnings to all and sundry to lock their

doors and not to move if they heard the sound of firing. He had made all arrangements with the ostlers to await his signal and be prepared to rush in and help in capturing the highwayman if he attempted any of his tricks during the night.

Somehow by daylight the gentleman looked quite harmless, and when he actually assented to the suggestion of breakfast, Mr. Bouncer hurried away, reassured. But when here turned, bearing the tray filled with the usual repast, his apprehension came back ten-fold.

Byron refused all offers of a hearty meal and took only a cup of tea, without milk or sugar, and a slice of toast.

"Are you sure, sir, you won't 'ave a hegg or a bit of 'am?" he asked. Byron smiled.

"You expect your visitors to eat a lot!" he observed.

Mr. Bouncer looked at him curiously. "Perhaps he's only in love," he thought.

"Well, sir," he replied, 'The White 'Orse' is famous for meals. We don't like gentlemen to leave us hungry."

"I see. A slur on the inn?" said Byron, amused.

"Yes, sir. That's just it. We caters for our people well."

He looked round the room to see if anyone else required his services and proceeded.

"Long journeys is trying to 'ealth. We always serves our food in good time. No hurrying folks, as it were. Not like these 'ere grand sort of places where they puts scalding soup before gentlemen two minutes to starting time and charges 'em double for leaving it. No, sir, that's not our way." Mr. Bouncer drew himself up with pride.

"My friend," said Byron, solemnly, "over-eating is the curse of the age. The inns you mention are a positive benefit to humanity." With this sage remark he rose, depositing a tip on the table, and walked out, leaving the waiter speechless with indignation. Now he knew his convictions were correct. He looked at the money and shook his head.

"Bouncer, it's ill-gotten gold. Don't you touch it."

He commenced to clear the table. It became necessary to remove the coins. He hesitated, then hurriedly put them into his pocket for fear of some innocent Boots finding them.

"I can pitch 'em in the pond," he reasoned. But his duties delayed him.

"All I 'opes is that he don't return to this 'ouse," he muttered, watching Byron step into his carriage.

"Well, Mr. Bouncer, and what about your 'ighwayman

now ? " asked the chambermaid archly, as she passed him on the stairs.

" Sally," said Mr. Bouncer, shaking his head at her, " Sally, what I says is this. A man as travels with loaded pistols, don't eat nothing, looking ferocious-like at innocent folks, and 'as unnatural views, is a wrong 'un. Say your prayers to-night, my girl. We've all had a narrow escape ! "

Meanwhile the carriage was bearing Byron on towards his destination. All unconscious of the stir he had roused in humble minds, he was looking out on the fields that were still rosy with the early sunlight. The morning was perfect, the sky cloudless, and as he opened the window he could catch the song of birds. Remembering Augusta's request, he had given orders accordingly. He liked that idea of riding across to the sea. The house where Mary was staying was quite near the old Castle and stood alone. The place was very deserted save for some cottages belonging to the fishing folk.

Late that afternoon he was galloping across the country towards the shore. As he neared, he gave a cry of joy. The sound of the waves thrilled him. The sea was Byron's early love. He reined in his horse and looked across the waste of water, watching the foam that dashed, in scattering its spray, so near that now he could feel the moisture in the air.

The grand old Castle towered up on his left. A fortress scarred by the traces of many a grim battle. Rugged, splendid and unconquered ! He looked up at it with admiration. From those walls Harold had sent down his showers of arrows on the Normans. Not far from this spot, Edith, his Queen, had sought by moonlight on the battle-field for her hero. He could see it all.

On his right stood a small house. The upper windows were already lit up. The blood rushed to Byron's face. A great awe swept over him and the roll of the waters sounded like an organ in his ears.

He dismounted and, turning his horse, walked towards the blue door. The house was very old. Augusta had often spent her holidays there with the children. What a grand home-coming was this ! He remembered the dismal ride to Annesley Hall. No one could bar his way to Mary now.

He rang the bell. There was no waiting. A servant called to the man to take his horse, and led the way upstairs to a sitting-room that looked out across the sea.

" Mrs. Leigh will be with you in a few minutes, my Lord."

He walked over to the window and stood, looking out. The view was magnificent ! Sky and water were one unbroken blue ! The thought came to him that the ocean is eternal love sending its mighty force into rivers and lakes, the human ebb and flow mingling with the infinite : that our weaker love is ever reinforced by a mightier love, and as the tide goes out so our stream of mortal passion is borne away into the depths beyond, to rest at last upon the bosom of Eternity.

He had never felt so near the stars before—so close to the God he had often sought in his poor, blind, groping way. The saints themselves can rise above the need of mortal affections, but such natures as Byron's need human hands to guide them upwards.

He drew a deep breath and took one last look at the sea. A child's cry overhead made him tremble. He heard the sound of steps and someone soothing it. Then his sister's voice outside the door.

" Charlotte, go up to the baby and let me know when the doctor comes down from the other room." The door opened and he stood looking at his sister in startled surprise.

Augusta's face was deathly white, and great dark rings under her eyes spoke of sleepless nights. Her appearance was that of one on the verge of a collapse. In a moment he took her in his arms.

" My dear little Goose ! You look worn out. Have you had sufficient help ? You should have sent for me sooner."

She looked up into his face and gasped out, " Byron, thank God you've come. I've been nearly out of my mind ! Oh, my dear, my dear ! " then checked herself. " It's all right. Only I am rather worn out. I feel as if I had not slept for weeks."

" He supported her to a chair. His first thought was that Augusta's health had broken down under the strain of nursing Mary. She was always so willing to help, but she was over-rating her own strength.

" This settles it ! " said he, cheerily. " I shall take charge now and you must rest, my dear. I always forget you do the work of twenty ; you never give in. How is Mary ? I heard the baby's voice. That sounded hearty enough, any way ! Our little one ! Well, thank God, it's over." He stopped and the words died away on his lips. His face blanched. What was he saying ? Of course it was over.

The baby had been born a fortnight ago. Why that look on Augusta's face ?

He started, with a cry.

" Mary . . . Oh, my God ! There's something wrong ! She's ill. . . . What is it ? "

" Byron, Byron ! " It was she who became the stronger now, clinging to him with all her might. " Byron, don't look like that, don't . . . you frighten me ! " She grasped his hand. It was cold as ice.

" Mary—she's ill. Something has happened." The words were forced from him.

" Byron, be brave, for my sake ! Oh, don't give way, I can't stand it. I've had such a time these last weeks."

He gave a loud cry. " She's not dying ? I won't believe that's what you want to tell me. It isn't true ! Take me to her now. My love shall bring her back from the gates of death ! "

" Byron, don't speak like that. You don't know what you are saying. It is not that."

" Augusta, you are trying to hide the truth. Don't—don't try to spare me, to break it gently. Out with it ! It's the suspense that drives me mad." He was trembling from head to foot. Suddenly he broke from her and turned to the door.

" Dead or dying I will stand beside her. Quick, take me to her now."

Augusta rushed forward and, placing herself before the curtains, waved him back.

" Byron, you must let me tell you in my own way. Can't you help me ? I've had the burden for the past three weeks."

He drew back and looked at her, passed his hand over his eyes and wearily stumbled back to the window seat, sinking down on it, a picture of silent despair.

Augusta went to him and put her arm round his shoulder.

" Byron, my dear, you will understand what I have been through when you hear."

" She's dead," he muttered. " You're afraid to speak. Mary is dead."

" No, no. I would not lie to you."

" Not dying, not dead ? The child is alive. What worse than death ? "

Augusta knelt down beside him.

" My poor boy, Mary has lost her reason. She has been out of her mind since the baby was born. I've sat alone up there

night after night, hoping, praying, but nothing happens. She is terribly ill. The doctor gives me little hope. Oh, won't you help me now?"

She broke down, and leaning her head on her hands burst into tears.

There was no other sound in the room except her low sobs, and the sound of the sea outside. The tide was coming in and Byron heard the break of the waves distinctly. There was a clock ticking on the shelf. The room was blurred and indistinct. He neither moved nor spoke. All feeling seemed to have left him. He put out his hand mechanically and touched his sister's head; then rose with extraordinary calm and supported her, raised her up and led her to a seat.

She looked up at him fearfully.

"Byron, forgive me. I meant to break it better than this."

"It's all right, dear." His voice was toneless, his face stern. She could not realize the effect her news had had on him. Her own strength was fast ebbing. She was only too thankful to lean on him.

"Where is she?" He asked the question firmly.

"Byron, do you want to see her? Can you bear it?"

"Yes." He looked resolute. She hesitated.

"Take me to her, please. I am quite ready," said he, in a queer, calm way.

She led the way upstairs and paused at a door, tapping at it. A man's voice replied. She opened and looked it, then beckoned. She tiptoed inside and he followed.

The sight that met his gaze burnt itself into his brain. This was not his Mary—this wan, pitiable creature lying propped up with pillows, her dark hair falling over her shoulders, straggling and unkempt. Her face was flushed with an unnatural hectic and her eyes large and terribly bright. She met his gaze with a meaningless smile, her thin, nervous hands played incessantly with each other, moved up and down the counterpane or plucked some flowers lying there into small shreds.

Byron did not know her. She might have been some phantom—some creature of the brain. She recalled Ophelia, and the words came into his mind—

> "Thoughts and affliction, Hell itself,
> She turns to favour and to prettiness."

It was a lie. There is no beauty in madness. It was horrible.

That thought was the last conscious one. He felt the room closing in on him.

" Dr. Adamson, quick ! Help me . . . my brother ! "

Someone was supporting him. He opened his eyes to find himself outside the room with his sister on one side and a strange gentleman on the other.

" Very sad, very sad indeed ! " murmured the doctor, sympathetically.

" He ought not to have gone in. I never dreamed. He seemed so strong. Byron, my dear, come ; let us help you to another room. You must lie down at once."

He pushed her away gently.

" I must go out. I must go out."

" Byron, what are you saying ? "

He steadied himself and leant against the wall.

" Let me get out. I want air. Let me get away ! "

The doctor looked at Augusta.

" It might revive him," he said.

" But not alone, Byron. I'll come with you, dear."

" No, no. Go back to her. Don't leave her alone. I'll go in again presently. Not now."

A wild, mirthless laugh resounded from the room.

" You hear ? " he cried wildly. " What do I matter ? Go back to her, both of you. You must not leave her alone."

The doctor hurried away. Byron stumbled towards the stairs, Augusta following. How he found his way to the bottom he never knew. Another loud, ringing laugh, and then the sound of moaning.

" Mrs. Leigh, Mrs. Leigh ! " The doctor was calling her.

" Byron, wait for me. I'll be down in a second," cried she, and ran upstairs again. He limped to the door, threw it open with an effort and made his way outside, down to the beach, breathing hard, biting his hand nervously, uttering little gasping cries.

The sun was setting, the water looked a golden red. The strange feeling of being held in a vice gave way. Something seemed to snap in his brain and he gave one wild shriek, threw up his arms, and broke into sobbing, cursing, raving, as one possessed, then threw himself down on the stones. The agony tore him to pieces, he lost his own reason for the time. Overhead the birds were flying with hoarse cries. The sullen roar of the incoming tide was in his ears. To his distracted vision the reddening clouds were blood-stained. Blood again !

It rose up between them—the curse of Annesley. The blood of William Chaworth, rising for vengeance. But on her! Mary was the victim, Mary the price for the crimes of his race! He found himself writhing on the ground, praying for death. A new pain now made him cry out. This was physical. His foot gave him excruciating torture. The long-forgotten taunt of his mother came back to him—

"Your lameness is a curse on you for your sins. You're a Byron, every inch of you! A limping devil! Oh, a nice husband for Mary Chaworth!"

He seemed to hear her voice clearly, and answered it.

"It's true. I know it. It's true! I've destroyed her! I loved her and destroyed her! I've done it. You're right, mother. It's the Byron blood. I can't escape."

The remorse was branding itself into his brain, searing his heart. He saw a far-off figure. Was it William Chaworth, seeking him still? No, the figure of a woman. Was it his mother, haunting him?

"For God's sake, no more! I can't bear it, I can't bear it!" His voice rose with a shriek, and then died away. The darkness closed over him, and for a time all things vanished from his remembrance.

* * * * * *

When Byron awoke to consciousness he found himself held by a strong pair of arms. Everything was in a mist. He could hear a strange, monotonous thud. He was too dazed to realize what it was, but his limbs were stiff. He wished the arms that were trying to lift him would leave him alone. He wanted to go on sleeping. A woman's face, old, weather-beaten and kindly, looked into his own. She was speaking at a great rate.

"Hurry, sir! We'll have the tide on us soon. Lor' sakes! To think of you falling down here! If I hadn't seed you, you'd 'ave been drownded like a rat!"

"Eh? What is it?" he murmured. Another thud and something wet splashed his face.

"Try to get up, sir. Just lean on me. Hurry! Do you want us both to be caught here? The tide's coming in with a rush."

It was indeed so. The sun had faded, the sky was darkening, and the waves were breaking on the shore within a few yards of them. It was one of the fisherwomen who had seen

the slight figure staggering forward towards the beach throw up his arms and then collapse. She had rushed to the spot in time to see Byron lying on the ground in a fit of strong convulsions. He was like a child in her firm grip. She helped him up and supported him while he got his footing.

"That's right! Steady, now," said she encouragingly.

Byron passed his hand across his brow and looked around. He was conscious of a deep blue mist overhead, with the interminable waves breaking sullenly on the shore. It was very like being in another world. He felt as though he had died and passed over the border. The fit had left him weak. He could recollect nothing at first.

The woman questioned him.

"Where are you staying? I'll give you an arm. It can't be far away."

"Not far," he replied vaguely; "no, not far."

He managed to stumble along with her help.

"That was a near thing," he said faintly. "Why, in the name of God, didn't you leave me there?"

"You talk, you talk!" she answered cheerily. "Just you come along with me. Why, your cloak's all wet."

He was far too weary to care.

"Do try and point out the 'ouse," she said.

"Oh, anywhere. Let me sit down. Leave me alone," he muttered.

"He's going off again, I do believe." She stopped and pointed to the right.

"There's a house with a blue door; see it?"

"No," he answered.

"Well, I do. See them lights in the top window?"

He looked up.

"There's someone up there, anyway," said she.

Someone up there! Oh, God! The remembrance of the vacant face, the glittering eyes, came back. He heard the horrible laugh that had wellnigh maddened him.

"Keep up, sir, do. Oh, you're a poor one! See, only half a yard now. Well, there!"

Byron sank back, limp and helpless. She propped him up against a boulder and ran, as fast as she could, to the door. Knocked at it loudly until the servant came.

"Here's a gentleman's ill. Lend a hand and get 'im in here to rest for awhile," said the woman; but before the servant could answer a lady hurried into the hall, overhearing the words.

"It's Lord Byron!" she cried. "Oh, where is Charlotte? Come at once, will you?"

The rescuer suddenly felt aggrieved. Why didn't a Lord faint in his own house? Her man would be home soon, and she had left his meal on the table. It wanted heating up. She led the way and the two followed.

"Byron, my dearest!" cried Augusta; "why didn't you wait for me? Charlotte, take his other arm. Oh, thank you so much," she added to the woman. "Come back to the house with us."

The other stepped back.

"No, lady, it's all right. I can't wait."

Augusta felt in her pocket and looked dismayed.

"I'm so sorry. I can't offer you . . ." but the woman moved away.

"My man's awaiting for his dinner," she said gruffly; then jerked her head in Byron's direction. "Guess he's all right now, anyway," and she hurried off. "A Lord!" she muttered resentfully. "What right 'as quality a-flopping about and trying to get drownded, when honest folk is busy? Jim ain't got no one to pick him up, I reckon," she reflected. "He'll be 'ome now and that rabbit pie all cold."

Her man had to face another rough night. He could do it better on hot rabbit pie than cold victuals. She didn't want him driven to the "Sailors' Joy." That way lay strife. So, bent on averting such a tragedy and totally oblivious of the one she had left behind, she went on her way.

As Byron neared the door he started and shrank back.

"Not again!" he whispered. "I can't see her again! Not yet!"

"No, dear," said Augusta. "You are coming to your own room to lie down and get a good rest."

They helped him into the dining-room and he sank down into a chair.

"Get me some brandy, Goose," said he. She did so and sat beside him waiting until he had recovered a little.

The house was very still now. The poor fantastic brain away upstairs had been lulled to sleep by a narcotic. Outside the wind rose and moaned round the house, the waves were still thundering against the beach, rain was falling steadily. He could hear it against the window.

"Won't you go to bed, Byron?" whispered Augusta. "You must try to sleep."

" I feel as if I shall never sleep again," said he.

They spoke in low whispers, as though they were in the chamber of death.

" We will talk in the morning. Come, dear. We must keep up our strength now."

He realized the strain on Augusta.

" Yes, you've had a terrible time." He rose.

" To-morrow I will help you more, dear. Only the shock. . . ."

" I know, I know."

They sat together a little while longer and then went upstairs together. She saw him to his room and he kissed her tenderly.

" God bless you, dear. I must take my share of the burden," he whispered.

" We must see what the doctor says to-morrow," said Augusta bravely. " We must pray for one thing, Byron. That our dear Mary recovers her reason. Nothing matters so much as that."

He bade her good-night and locked his door. Outside a storm was raging. He slowly undressed and went to bed, but lay awake for hours, listening to the thunder. At last it subsided and he grew drowsy. The wind died away into long wails, the noise of waters grew dull. Thank God, sleep was coming at last. He heard it still, that one sound recurring incessantly, the falling of rain against the windows. His eyes were closing at last, but still the rain could be heard. Fainter now. Mary had died, Mary had died. It was the earth covering her coffin. He could hear it pattering down. They were lowering her into the grave. The dull, monotonous pattering of rain lulled him to slumber.

* * * * * *

What was to be the end? In the days of suspense that followed, Augusta asked herself that question often. Byron took his share of the watching beside Mary's bedside. Brother and sister watched the flickering mind struggling back to some show of reason, but often relapsing again to frenzy. The long years of misery at Colwick Hall had done their work. Mary's suppression of her own feelings had wrought on her nerves. Now she raved of Byron, now cried out for her mother and child. She would talk for hours to herself, imagine she was on the terrace at Annesley and call on Byron to come to her and forgive, forgive. Why had she sent him

away? In those moments he would gather her in his arms and try to buoy himself up with the hope that she would soon be herself again. But his heart sank when another fit seized her. She cowered before the picture of William Chaworth and spoke of the curse.

The doctor grew very grave.

"I must warn you," he said to Augusta, "that any thought of her travelling abroad is out of the question for ever. If we can nurse her back to reason, it is the most we can hope for, and there will always be the danger of a return. She will never be immune from the peril of a relapse. That time it would, I fear, be the end."

Augusta kept this to herself. Byron was so obviously breaking up under the strain. He locked himself in his room for hours, when not by Mary's side.

One day he had done this when Augusta knocked at his door. He unlocked it; she entered, went to him and put her arms round his neck, kissing him tenderly.

"Let us be thankful, dear. God has been merciful. She is herself. Our poor Mary awoke at last, two hours ago, and knew me."

She looked at him pitifully.

"The doctor is hopeful now. He thinks she may be able to go home at last."

"Augusta!"

"Listen, Byron. Everything is altered now. We can only do as Mary wishes now."

"You mean she wants to go back to Annesley?"

"I think so, yes."

"And I must lose her for ever!" He broke down.

"Byron, my dear, we might have lost her for ever by death, or worse than death. Think, dear. You need no longer reproach yourself. She has recovered her reason. Think what it means."

Augusta looked down on the bowed head and tried to stifle her own tears. He could not speak.

"Byron, the doctor has asked me where she lives. He says that her mind must have peace, that she is longing for her home. We know that is true. We heard her, and even in her delirium she always cried for Annesley, for her little child."

"The child of Musters!" said he, "but for our little one—she has no thought of that."

" Oh, it's too soon. We must let her get quite well. She does not know yet what she wants. You see ? "

He looked at her beseechingly.

" There will always be the danger of a relapse." The doctor had been so final. Should she tell him ? Could she not spare Byron this bitter knowledge ?

" Dearest, she will need a long rest. All thoughts of travel must be put away."

" But we can stay somewhere in England ? "

" Nothing can be settled until Mary herself can decide," said Augusta gently. He looked at her. The fighting spirit rose.

" You mean I am to allow her to be taken back to that cur— to let her suffer again ! Never, by God ! "

She put out her hand to stay him.

" You said, Byron, that if Mary's reason was restored you would make any sacrifice. Well, the worst is over. But now we must think only of her safety, her peace of mind. You see, she must never have another shock. Oh, Byron, I wish she had never written to you to come back. It ought never to have been."

Byron's eyes filled with tears again.

" Hobhouse said the same," he answered sadly.

" There is some bar between you two," said his sister. " If it only meant your suffering, that would be bad enough ; but when it strikes down Mary as well, how can we force it further ? "

He sat deep in thought for a long while.

" How can she go back to Annesley ? What of the child ? "

" That must be a secret. No one must ever know," said Augusta quietly.

" What do you mean ? "

" Mary's one thought is to ' atone,' as she calls it, for her sin. Oh, forgive me, dear, those are her own words. Byron, for the present, anyway, we must leave matters as they are. I have thought of this. We must give her time to gain strength and more courage. *Till then I will take the little one. She shall be as my own.*"

He gave a little cry and folded her in his arms.

" Augusta ! What can I say ? You will keep our secret until Mary is strong and well. Oh, she must come back to me after all. She will. I see ; you mean she is so weak she wants Annesley because we came together there. That's it, isn't it ? "

She was silent.

"When can I see her?"

"Not yet. But soon, soon. Let us thank God. He has restored her reason." She harped on this thought. She dared not buoy him up with hope.

A week passed by and then she went to him again.

"The doctor thinks you may see her to-day. But he wants to speak to you first." He went down to the dining-room. The old man looked at him searchingly.

"Lord Byron, your sister has told me much of this sad affair. I am thankful to be able to report that the poor lady has now become herself again."

"Thanks to your skill," said Byron warmly.

"And your sister's nursing."

"Ah, yes." At this moment Augusta entered the room. The doctor smiled at her, then took out his glasses, polished them slowly and adjusted them. He seemed loth to proceed.

"Augusta, Dr. Adamson knows that Mary and I are . . . were going away together; he understands?"

"Quite, quite," said the doctor. "But now, Lord Byron, we must face facts. Such a step is out of the question."

"You mean she is going back to Musters?"

"Nothing of the kind." Augusta laid her arm on Byron's. Dr. Adamson proceeded.

"Mrs. Musters has asked for you. She has something to say. Before you hear it I ought to prepare you. She has asked for you to take farewell."

Byron rose.

"How dare you tell me this?"

"It is true, Byron," said Augusta. "Remember that she is still very ill, very weak."

"Why, why?" cried Byron, his face drawn with pain.

"We must realize that no one has a right to step between her and her own soul. The poor lady is afflicted with the fear of . . . how shall I tell you? . . . the fear of God. To her, religion is so strong that she looks upon her illness as a judgment."

"She is too ill to realize . . ." began Byron. The other interrupted sternly.

"She has been so near the gates of death that it is not for us to know how much is true, how much is fancy. The point is that her future peace, almost her life, depends on a tranquil mind, a quiet conscience. She is choosing her own path to it.

Lord Byron, a woman's soul is sometimes truer and stronger than our own," said the doctor, with deep emotion.

"Has she no love for me?"

"Love? Ah, yes—spiritual love, but passion has died away, I think, for ever."

Byron was silent. Try as he would, a wild rebellion rose up within him. Fate had cheated him once more. The only being he truly loved was now withdrawing herself from him.

"Why does she fear to trust herself with me?" he asked at last.

"You forget she has her duty to her eldest child," said the doctor gently. "Mrs. Leigh, I think it would be best for Lord Byron to see her now." He rose and held out his hand.

"I thought it kinder to prepare you," he said, and opened the door for Augusta to pass out. Byron followed her like one in a dream. The last ray of hope that had flickered up was dying now.

"There is nothing to be afraid of, dear. She looks so beautiful."

Mary's bed had been moved near to the window, which was open, and the sunlight fell full on her face as she lay there—all trace of wildness gone. The sweet face was very tranquil, and she looked at Byron wistfully. The sound of waves rippling on the beach could be heard distinctly. The room was full of peace.

With a stifled cry he went to her, bent over her and kissed her reverently. Tears, welcome tears, came to his relief.

"My poor Byron," she whispered. Her voice sounded far away. Such a faint little echo of the tones he loved so well.

"Look at her, Byron," whispered Augusta, when he sank down beside the bed and hid his face against the counterpane. She wanted the picture of Mary's beauty to efface the other vision.

"Can you forgive me, beloved?" he whispered.

"There is nothing to forgive," she answered. "I want you to remember that I always loved you. Always. You will believe that of me? I have brought you so much sorrow."

"No, no!"

"It is true. Years ago, when you first spoke to me, I sent you away. I was free then. The sin was mine from the first. God has punished me."

"Don't say that, Mary. Don't speak like that."

"My dear, when I stood at the altar and vowed to love my

husband, I loved you then. That was my sin. I strove to be true to him and failed."

"We belong, we belong to each other. You said, that night," he cried out, then checked himself at a warning glance from Augusta. Mary's head sank back.

"Byron, we must not excite her."

She lay still for awhile, then opened her eyes and smiled.

"I want you to forget. We must go back to our dreams again. My little one calls to me. Shall I deprive her of a mother's love? And if I had never written to you, you would not have returned. You told me so."

Byron could find no words. He covered her hand with kisses. He hid his face to spare her the sight of his own tears. Her manner was that of one waking from a long sleep. The strength of her passionate longing had died with the birth of the child. He realized that too well. And her soul now eluded him. It seemed to be floating out, away to the depths. His own could not stay it. He looked at the great dark eyes, that met his own so pathetically. Long ago her sweet, elusive charm had drawn him to her feet. He understood. She was the star of his boyhood. In drawing near to earth the light had died.

"Byron, I want you to be happy. You must try to forget. We were never meant to love each other so. See what has come of it. Some fate is hanging over us. I have darkened your life too long. I must go back to Annesley, my home. I am the first of all my race to have brought one shadow on it. We could not live together unwed. My daughter Mary would suffer. It never can be. All these days I have been in the dark, always in darkness. Augusta says it was my fancy. I felt as though I had been buried alive." She put her hand to her head and grew excited.

"Mary, don't try to speak," said Byron.

"I want to say farewell. I am afraid more harm will come if we should meet again. But I cannot bear to think that your life is wasted for me."

Augusta tried to stay her, but she grew restless again.

"*Byron, I want you to wed some woman who can give you all I robbed you of. I want to know that you have found some anchor. I should be at peace.*"

He realized this was the end for him. That they were parting from this hour. She seemed to be gliding further away. A chill swept over him. The scene became unreal.

He longed to cry out to her, to clasp her in his arms and pour out his passionate love once more. But she lay so weak. She looked at him so imploringly that he could find no words to utter.

"You will, you will?" she whispered.

"If it will bring you peace, beloved, yes."

He heard the waves outside, the clock on the mantelshelf ticking away the minutes that would never return. He saw the face he loved grow peaceful. There was a long silence, and Augusta took Mary in her arms. After a while she raised her head. "She is falling asleep, I think," she whispered. "Come, Byron. We must not disturb her longer."

He rose, took one last look at the still figure. This was the end for him. No last embrace, no tearful farewell, no answering thrill or touch of hands. Like a vision Mary Chaworth had drifted into his life in the years so far away. All the storm, the passion, hushed itself to sleep. He left her lying in the sunlight and went out into the storm of life once more. His heart seemed dead.

Some months later Society was startled by the unexpected announcement that Lord Byron was engaged to Miss Isabella Milbanke, only daughter of Sir Ralph and Lady Milbanke.

Lady Melbourne was beside herself with delight.

The curtain was shortly to ring up on the second act of the tragedy.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Byron had taken spacious rooms in Albany, Piccadilly, that quiet enclosure so remote from the busy thoroughfare, yet in the very heart of it. His low windows commanded a view of the entire length of the long narrow colonnade that stretches from Albany Courtyard to Vigo Street.

There he sat, gazing out on the fitful patch of wintry sunlight that danced in and out of the pillars, late one afternoon.

He was thinking very seriously. For ever wondering if the step he had taken was the right one.

Suddenly a knock at the door startled him. Fletcher entered.

"My Lord, Lady Caroline is here and wishes to see you."

"I am not at home to anyone but Mr. Hobhouse," replied Byron.

Fletcher was about to retire when he was thrust aside by someone brushing past him, and Caroline stood upon the threshold, gasping with excitement.

Byron was astonished. He rose with a look of stern indignation.

Fletcher went out, discreetly closing the door.

"I fail to understand the meaning of your intrusion," said Byron at last.

"I've just heard," said Caroline.

"Heard, what?"

For answer, she rushed forward and flung herself into his arms.

"You know! You know! It's done to spite me. I never thought you would!"

Byron put her away quietly.

"After your disgraceful exhibition at Lady Heathcote's party all friendship between us is ended. You will kindly leave at once."

"You are cruel! You wish to kill me," sobbed Caroline in the greatest distress. "I did it because I love you. Now I have not seen you for weeks. You have not written. You

live in mystery. You torture me with silence and, to crown all, you ask that detestable prude, Isabella Milbanke, to marry you. I shall die ! "

Caroline clung to him ; she wept and cried and beat her little hands against Byron's firm shoulders until her knuckles ached.

He said nothing, but began to soften by degrees. Tears always affected him. He was liable to weep easily himself. He fought with an inclination to pet her, finally leading her to a chair.

" Caroline," said he, gently but firmly, " we must part now. Please put aside this foolish romance and be sensible. Your name will be utterly ruined if you invite scandal again."

His own sufferings had made him very susceptible to the passions of others, and he began to pity this reckless woman again.

" Now listen," he continued. " You have a splendid husband, and his family is much exposed to the world's eyes. This folly must end. It has gone too far already. Leave me now, and let us meet as friends."

" Do you love Isabella Milbanke ? " she asked.

" I prefer not to discuss the matter," he replied.

" Do you love me still ? " she cried.

" I have never loved you, Caroline," he burst forth angrily.

She wailed and fell upon her knees, then broke into fresh tears.

" Would you drive me mad ? " cried Byron.

" I worship the ground you walk on ! I adore you ! I cannot endure life without you ! Love me ! Tell me you love me, or how shall I go on living ? "

He softened again. Fierce passion struck a note in his heart. He had suffered himself too much from his love for Mary not to respect this evident anguish.

" Caroline," he said, sitting down in his chair, and putting his hand on her shoulder. " I want to cure this madness once for all. My heart lies elsewhere. Yours should do so also. Go home, and let us have done with all this nonsense." He added quietly, " If you truly loved me you would not make difficulties."

She gradually ceased weeping, and rising, stood looking out of the window in silence. Then made a little gesture with her hands, as if to say :

" Ah, well, I suppose you are right."

Then she thoughtfully sniffed into her ridiculous little handkerchief, and looked at Byron with a comic reproach over the frill of lace. His eyes twinkled too.

"You're a brute and a beast," she said.

"I know," he answered, smiling.

"You are not angry with me now."

"No, we don't get angry with squirrels."

"You swear to think kindly of me," she pouted.

She was like a child in her simple blue dress and straw bonnet tied with pink ribbons.

"We'll see how you behave," he answered.

He was reading over a page he had written, and took no heed of her. She moved swiftly to the sideboard and poured wine into a glass, from a decanter standing there, then taking a phial from her bag, quickly put part of its contents into the glass, and after slipping the phial back into its place, walked across the room carefully carrying the wine to Byron's desk.

"What's this," said he.

"A peace offering," she replied.

"Is all the peace on my side? Where's yours?"

She skipped back to the decanter and helped herself.

"I was waiting for the invitation," she said.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Byron apologized, now in a better temper and disposed to relent.

"To a return of sanity on both parts," he toasted, and drank the wine. She sipped hers, looking at him. Then there was a few moments' profound silence.

All at once Byron started and frowned.

"What have you done?" he asked, sharply.

"Done? Nothing!" she replied with innocent eyes.

There was a pause before he answered:

"You've drugged me."

She laughed.

"Nonsense, I have not."

"Don't tell lies," he replied, "that wine was bitter."

She agreed, nodding her head.

"Yes, it is; there's something wrong with it. I have not drunk mine, see!"

"No, I see. All right, Caroline! It doesn't matter."

He stood, pressing his hand over his eyes and trying to conquer a tendency to fall down.

Caroline was triumphant. Her crazy little mind was gleeful now that she had accomplished her purpose. To

entrap Byron once more. Byron was her own now, she could mould him to her purpose, if only for a night. She had given him enough to create a complete unconsciousness, so he would be passive. A form for her to hug and kiss with no fear of resistance.

She watched him now with bright eyes and parted lips.

Byron sat in his chair and stared at the paper before him for more than five minutes. Then shook himself, and tossed his head. His eyes were closing, and he spoke as one asleep.

" So glad you came, Caroline ; you know what is best to kill the past."

She thrilled from head to foot, and sat on the arm of his chair. His head drooped, and she held it with her nervous hand, and waited.

This was the greatest fun. So exciting, so romantic and daring. All at once, he struggled to his feet, and put his hand out as if to grasp something. She just managed to guide him to the sofa before he collapsed utterly.

" Now you are mine, Byron. This is my reward," she said. " It's divine ; it's heavenly. See, I can play with your little soft curls. You let me kiss you now as often as I please."

She snuggled down beside him like an animal, fondled him, drew his head down to her own shoulder, and laid her lips against his pale cheek.

Presently, a knock came at the door. She jumped up, and seized her bonnet, which she had flung on the table, put it on over her disordered hair, and wondered what to do.

" Oh, yes ! To you, sir," said Fletcher's voice in the corridor, and before Caroline could move one way or another, she found herself face to face with Mr. Hobhouse.

He stood with his hand on the door knob, looking at her in surprise and disapproval. Then bowed stiffly, and closed the door.

" Oh, Mr. Hobhouse, thank goodness you've come," said her Ladyship in what seemed to be a gasp of relief.

" Why ? May I ask the reason ? "

She pointed to Byron.

" Look at him," she said. " I'm terrified ! "

Hobhouse hurried to Byron's side without a word, and looked down at the inert figure with great anxiety.

" What is the matter with him, Lady Caroline ? " said he.

"I don't know. Byron is not himself; he has been drinking, I think," she answered breathlessly. "He wrote to me to call. I came, and found him . . . like this."

"He wrote to you to call?" Hobhouse looked at her keenly. "How long have you been here, pray?"

"Oh, only a few minutes. I can go now with an easy mind now that you have come."

Hobhouse bowed coldly.

"Yes, Lady Caroline, it is not right for you to be here at all. I should leave at once if I were you."

"I felt I could not leave Byron . . . so . . ." she began.

"You could have called Fletcher," said Hobhouse. "Is your carriage waiting? I will ask him to summon it."

"No! No! I came on foot. Good-bye, Mr. Hobhouse. I do hope Byron is not really ill."

With these words, Caroline offered a trembling hand to Hobhouse, who touched it coldly. Then he followed her, opened the door, and allowed her to escape. She did so more hurriedly than she had intended. The outer door closed with a loud thud, and Caroline was gone.

A silence, broken only by the solemn ticking of the clock, fell upon the room. Hobhouse, breathing a sigh of relief at the departure of her Ladyship, threw open the window and, after making a further examination of Byron, called Fletcher.

"How long had that lady been here?" he asked.

"About three-quarters of an hour, I should think, sir," replied the worthy man. "But what is the matter with his Lordship?"

"Ah, that's the question," said Hobhouse. "Has he been like it for long?"

"He was as right as right can be when Lady Caroline arrived." Hobhouse frowned, and cockled his lips up after his fashion when thoughtful.

"Are you sure, Fletcher? He has not been at all indisposed or inclined to drinking?" he asked.

"No, sir! When he came in this afternoon he was as firm as a rock, and very lively."

"Damn that woman!" ejaculated Hobhouse under his breath, and Fletcher inwardly echoed his sentiments.

"His Lordship has had something that has sent him to sleep," said Hobhouse. "It is not serious, but we ought to try and rouse him. It is not at all good to leave him like this. Have you seen him like it before?"

"Well, no, sir," said Fletcher, anxiously. "He is sometimes a little abstracted, but . . . well, no more than other gentlemen. I mean when his Lordship is worried, for instance."

"Oh, yes. I quite understand," answered Hobhouse.

Fletcher never liked admitting anything that might imply Byron was not perfect. There had been quite a great deal of "abstraction" lately, but it was not his place to give his master away to anyone, even Mr. Hobhouse.

"Let us get him to the air," said the latter, and between them they conveyed Byron, like a bundle, to a deep chair near the window.

Hobhouse slipped his hand under the dressing-gown, and held it over Byron's heart.

"Rather unequal, and too rapid," said he. "Fletcher, get water!"

The valet obeyed, and between them they bathed Byron's temples until his curls were like little corkscrews.

The action of the water seemed to affect him, for he sighed, moved his head, and knitted his brows.

"I think he will revive soon," said Hobhouse. "Please prepare some coffee, and have it ready, if he can drink it."

The clock chimed eight. They were in the dark, except for the light of the lamps along the colonnade outside which shone through the large bow windows and partially illuminated the room.

Fletcher withdrew, and Hobhouse remained beside Byron, watching for a sign of returning life.

What sudden wave of tenderness overcame the naturally reserved and critical Hobhouse could not have been explained at the moment. But he afterwards remembered that sitting by his friend's side in the darkened room, somewhat anxious, and feeling a strong sense of superior strength, he recognized a deeper love for him than he had hitherto known.

He had often felt irritated by Byron's recklessness and disregard for convention. He had censured him severely in in his mind, and verbally as well, for indiscretions and weaknesses.

But, somehow, all this faded. He simply loved, and the feeling wiped out everything else. The room was quite still in the deep shadows. Byron moved and uttered a little moan, so Hobhouse shook him gently, and spoke to him.

It takes a long time to break through the dense cloud that laudanum throws on the senses. It is so heavy that the mind

cannot rise above it. Caroline Lamb had given Byron a dose that was calculated to keep him unconscious for hours.

Hobhouse's artificial restorations would not have been at all advisable or necessary if he had not found the heart a little too erratic. Truthfully, it would have been much better for Byron to come through his sleep naturally and wake of his own accord. But the former did not quite understand these things, and he considered it essential that Byron should be brought back to life at all costs.

At last Byron opened his eyes, heavily at first, as Fletcher entered with candles.

"He is coming back at last," said Hobhouse.

"That's good, sir; perhaps some strong black coffee will help," suggested the valet, and went out again.

Byron realized at last that Hobhouse was there, and hazily asked what had happened. He thought it was morning and that he was in bed.

"Where did you spring from, Hobby?"

"I'll tell you presently; you won't understand yet," said Hobhouse, who never wasted time if he could help it.

Fletcher arriving with coffee, they persuaded Byron to drink it, and a dawn of reason appeared in his face shortly after he had done so. He had a tendency to fall asleep again once or twice, and could not speak clearly, but he was able to hear the story of Lady Caroline's visit with a degree of intelligence.

"I don't want to interfere," said Hobhouse, "but she's a harmful woman, and if you take my advice you ignore her now completely; if you're not careful, Byron, you will kill yourself over some idiotic female and your impossible craving for sensation."

"I never wanted her; she came. I've done with Caroline Lamb, months ago. And now I've proposed to the excellent Miss Isabella Milbanke, so there's an end," said Byron.

"That is splendid," exclaimed Hobhouse. "I always thought it advisable, as you know, and I am sure you'll be better for it."

"Oh, to hell with you," cried Byron, despairingly. "What's the good of it all, anyway? Everything is over for me as far as love is concerned. So it doesn't matter whom I marry. Miss Milbanke will do as well as another."

"You're not yourself, Byron, so I won't dispute your words. I have always understood that the young lady

has been attached to you, and is a very estimable person."

"Oh God, how charming!" cried Byron. He rose laughing. He was unsteady and still sleepy, and leant against the window frame, with his forehead resting on his arm, for some time.

"I was thinking of something, Hobby," he said; "what was it . . . something or other?"

He went to his desk, and found the page he had left unfinished. After looking at it for awhile in silence, he sat down, took up his pen, and began to write. He gave one look at Hobhouse, and his eyes were like sapphires.

When Byron wrote, he was scarcely human. Something entered his being that overcame any earthly impediment. He was young and his spirit was unquenched. His subconscious brain was entirely independent.

An hour ago he had been prostrated with the effects of laudanum, and now, while his body was relaxed and his eyes half closed, he had the impulse to write verse. It might not be consistent, and it might be consigned to the flames to-morrow, but it was verse and, probably, splendid verse.

Hobhouse watched him rapidly using his pen, and getting more and more concentrated as his brain started working. The cloud on it faded now. The room was very still except for the feverish scratch of Byron's quill. His friend was fascinated by the mighty spirit that inhabited the strange and beautiful being before him. The place was electric with intensity as Byron wrote on. His face was like ivory, and his hair gleamed copper in the candlelight.

At last, after a long time, he threw down his pen, rose and swayed like a reed in the storm.

Hobhouse was by his side in a moment. Byron broke into a nervous little laugh.

"That's better, Hobby," he said. "It's gone all right. What? Oh, something I saw while I was asleep. It was likely to trouble me. It's best on paper, out of the system, like an illness."

He was trembling all over.

"May I read it, Byron?" asked Hobhouse.

"No! burn it!"

"Is it not for publication then?"

"No! No!" cried Byron. "Impossible . . . burn it!"

He threw himself down in an arm-chair, and lay as if exhausted.

Hobhouse took up the paper.

The original idea had been crossed out, and there followed a poem covering several pages, but from the drift of the first few lines, his friend perceived it was too personal for public reading. Mary was for ever with Byron at this time. She haunted him. And everything that he wrote was impregnated with her affliction.

"Burn it, Hobby!" he repeated.

"It is a great pity, Byron; could you not change its construction somewhat, and disguise the fact that it is personal? Great work should never be destroyed," exclaimed Hobhouse.

"Burn it! I shall give up poetry when I marry. It's too compromising. Lady Melbourne wanted me to marry the saintly Isabella. Good! I will. I hate Caroline and all her kind. Let us turn good, and take unto ourselves a wife, and try to be faithful to her."

"There's no harm in trying," said Hobhouse.

"No! We'll turn ourselves into a pattern for the youth of England."

Byron laughed bitterly, and clenched his fists fiercely, then rose, and limped about the room. Finally, he seized the poem, and tore it into shreds.

"There, that's over!" he said, and bit his lips. "I'm tired," he went on, "damned tired."

"Won't you retire then?"

"No, I want to talk to you," said Byron.

"All right, my time is yours!"

Hobhouse seated himself, and Byron wandered round, fitfully collecting cushions, which he dropped by Hobhouse's side, and then sank down upon. They talked far into the night of all kinds of things, of temptations, of soul struggles, of impulses and upliftings. And the clock chimed half-past three.

"Byron," said Hobhouse, "have you ever taken laudanum before?"

"No! I've often been tempted."

"You won't repeat the experiment, will you?" asked his friend.

"I don't know! It's rather a blessing," answered Byron.

Hobhouse looked him very seriously in the face.

"It's the curse of this age, Byron. Avoid it like the plague! Look at Coleridge! You don't want to get the damned poison into your blood! You'd never be free!"

" Nonsense, Hobby ! I can curb any desire of my own will. I shall never be a slave to any appetite," said Byron with a toss of his head.

" Well, promise me you won't ! "

" Of course."

Byron laughed, and shook his friend's hand.

" I'm thankful you are soon to marry such a good woman as Miss Milbanke," said Hobby.

Byron did not answer. He sighed, and said good night with a very doubtful smile.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Byron's letter of proposal had arrived one morning at breakfast, Isabella Milbanke read it with tolerance, and handed it to her father ; after which proceeding she proceeded to cut her bacon, and eat it carefully, without the smallest trace of emotion.

Miss Milbanke was, like her dress, plain and unornamental. She was precise, and never permitted anything to interfere with the ordinary routine of life. She studied never to appear disturbed, and suppressed a bad temper with success. She had a vindictive one in the making, and a cold, fanatical disposition. But outwardly she presented the appearance of a round, fresh-complexioned girl with commonplace features redeemed by the look of youth and inexperience. She wore a staid, self-possessed, self-satisfied look, yet remained the soul of demureness.

Many of her friends were afraid of her, and called her " the Icicle." She had formed her own puritanical views of life, and proudly imagined herself a complete judge of human nature.

Her figure, like herself, was solid, and she affected a great simplicity of dress that made her appear dowdy. But to Isabella Milbanke, learned in mathematics, student of theology and at times of poetry, the mind was all. The heart, like the toilet, had been left to chance and, consequently, had remained undeveloped.

For affection, however, she substituted Duty. And she was a model daughter. Obeyed her parents in everything. Especially her mother, Lady Noel, of whom she bade fair to become a first-rate copy.

Sir Ralph Milbanke read the letter with delight.

" Ah, my dear girl, this is excellent," said he.

" You think so, Papa ? I scarcely know," she replied.

" Isabella, my dear, you must begin to look things in the face. The time has come when marriage is your destiny," said her father, helping himself to toast.

Judith Milbanke smiled coldly.

" Of course you will lay aside your former objection, and accept him," she said coaxingly.

" I can hardly otherwise considering I encourage him, as you desired me to do, Mamma. Besides, I fully realize the advantages of this match. He undoubtedly loves me, although I have not allowed myself to think so. His letter proves it."

She glanced at her father. Sir Ralph's position financially was a pretty bad one. She was quite aware that he had almost ruined himself with his electioneering campaigns. Her mother talked of it daily. It was her duty to marry well, and make matters safe and comfortable for her parents; also, incidentally, herself. Yet she dallied with the idea.

" Before I reply to this, I must think," she said. " You know, Mamma, I gave up Lord Eden because he was wild, and his prospects might have been injured in consequence. Lord Byron's reputation is somewhat peculiar, and I must think of myself as well as our position. I have no desire to marry unless there is a surety of comfort and financial security."

" That is as you will manage matters, Isabella," observed her mother. " I have made many inquiries about his position, and he is extremely wealthy. He has Newstead Abbey. It will be for you to mould your husband. You are a good girl. You know the rights and wrongs of things. The woman guides the man if she is anything of a wife, remember."

" Pardon me, Madam, you can hardly say with truth that you guide me," protested Sir Ralph, bristling, with a teaspoon upraised. He was very touchy on this point, because he knew very well, in his own heart, that his strong-minded wife managed affairs with an iron hand.

" You are old enough to guide yourself, my dear, and yet a splendid quagmire you've landed us all into with your precious electioneering," she answered cuttingly. Turning to Isabella, she continued hotly:

" Lord Byron is young, the rage of London and a poet. His income should be satisfactory. His position certainly is. No man is more popular or sought after. The match will be a splendid thing for all of us, and Isabella is fortunate. My dear, if you wish to please me, accept him at once."

She launched this request as a command. Isabella raised her brows, and sat silent.

"Such a chance will not come your way much longer. You will die a spinster," continued her mother.

Isabella set her cup down with care and deliberation.

"I will write this morning," she said, and, excusing herself, left the room. As soon as she had gone her parents fell to discussing the matter more fully.

"No, listen to me," said Lady Milbanke, leaning across the table confidentially. "This second proposal is too good to miss. Perhaps Belle was a little too young before. Her aunt is very anxious to make provision for her, but the girl was foolish then. I saw that and insisted on her corresponding with Lord Byron so as to keep her in touch with him. Why, he's the lion of Society; he has a great position. It will help us in every way. He is most gifted, has a wonderful prospect, and can give Belle her place as a leader of Society. I have brought her up to such a place. She will do well to take her chance. Do you agree?"

Sir Ralph considered, "Belle is so sedate and unusual. If she fails to hold her husband, that will put another face on the matter. She has never expressed great affection for anything or anybody."

Lady Milbanke rose impatiently.

"Affection! Leave that for fools. You have brought me almost to beggary, and I look to Belle to keep us in a tolerable amount of security until Lord Wentworth dies. He will provide for us amply, as I have reason to know. Till then we have to look to ourselves, and I'm afraid affection takes a very secondary place when money is at stake."

"Well, well, you know best," said Sir Ralph, always extremely conscious that his own self-made misfortunes were responsible for a lot of unpleasantness in the family.

* * * * * * *

Some months later Isabella sat in her room inspecting her wedding dress. It was of plain white muslin and boasted no ornament.

"Quite nice, what do you think, mamma?" she said; "quite suitable to the occasion."

"You might have chosen something more elaborate," suggested Lady Milbanke.

"I consider it an unnecessary extravagance to have costly wedding gowns. It is too solemn a ceremony to think of such

things. I shall prepare myself in my own way, if you please. And Mrs. Clermont approves entirely."

Lady Milbanke smiled.

"Of course, my child; you are a good girl. I have no doubts or fears as to your wisdom. And yet a little elegance is surely permissible," she ventured.

"I have carefully considered everything," answered Isabella. "I shall endeavour to do my duty as Byron's wife, but I refuse to stoop to frivolity or worldliness. I find him very difficult to understand at times. He will, I hope, settle down later. I wish he was not a poet. It is not good for any man to be constantly imagining things, and such bold things."

Her mother nodded.

"The good keeping of accounts is certainly more to the point. Of course, if his poems bring in a good income, well, that is all to the good. Otherwise, if it is merely a pastime. Belle, my dear, you must persuade him to give up his writings. Give him no encouragement in that direction. Learn to mould Byron. A woman can do it with any husband. I have guided your father to the best of my ability. Had he taken my advice, things would be on a very much surer footing. Work your way carefully. Money, my child, is the most important thing in life. Always remember that."

Isabella folded her hands complacently.

"At least I shall have a position."

"Of course," snapped her mother; "why else should I have given my consent? Above all we must see to it that we get the settlements. The sale of Newstead Abbey is most essential. I believe Byron has some silly sentiment about this place. I am sure that Mr. Hobhouse encourages it. There must be no time for that sort of thing, so see to it, Belle, that you give him no rest until the Abbey is sold."

Lady Milbanke could become a thing of steel on the instant. It was she who had superintended the arrangements of the marriage settlements. She had driven a hard bargain, and, to the dismay of Hobhouse, Byron had been compelled to pledge his all and secure his wife's future by leaving himself practically insolvent and dependent on his writings. The sacrifice of dear old Newstead Abbey had caused him and Augusta a heavy heartache. But the Milbankes were much poorer than they admitted. The match was entirely mercenary on their side, and Byron was too unhappy and depressed to worry about the business side of the whole affair. Lady

Milbanke was a hard, calculating creature devoid of humanity and crazy for gain. Hobhouse disliked her intensely and evaded her when he met her. Her one topic of conversation was Byron's financial position.

She despised her foolish husband and looked to Isabella to repair the family fortunes.

To the dismay of Hobhouse the marriage had been rushed on with incredible haste. Byron, after his proposal had been accepted, had felt grave doubts. He had several times come to arguments with Isabella, and realized that his future wife was by no means disposed to be pliable or sympathetic.

Lady Milbanke had seen to it that the announcements of the engagement were bruited far and wide. She chose the date and forced on the completion of the bargain.

As for Isabella—well, she was marrying money. She would be the most envied woman in London. And Byron was certainly very good looking. She did not own to herself that he possessed an extraordinary unearthly beauty that terrified her at times—that she was mating a man of exceptional powers. She only preened herself on the fact that she, out of all the women in Society, had won him.

She calmly laid the muslin gown on her bed and imprinted a cold kiss on Lady Milbanke's cheek.

"Dear mamma, whatever you do for me is always right," she said. And the elder woman looked at her with approval.

"She will watch our interests well," she thought, and said no more.

The wedding day arrived.

The bride awaited her ordeal with perfect composure. Her mother superintended with pardonable criticism, although Isabella's severe dress had nothing in it to criticize, except its extreme dowdiness. It was high in the neck and long in the sleeves, and her face was pink and white, devoid of any rouge or powder. Her fair hair was plainly arranged in a knot on top of her well-shaped head.

Mrs. Clermont, a dark, thin, respectable-looking woman, with narrow eyes and a habit of expression which made her always on the verge of smiling triumphantly, was now summoned to assist the rites.

She had commenced life as a scullery maid and worked her way into the kitchen before she had been in the family many months. Circumstances and her own particular method of being the only reliable servant when anything urgent was

needed, soon brought her into contact with the family. For Lady Milbanke and the young mistress she developed a frantic devotion. Life in their service was her one aim. But she never forgot her place, and mounted step by step up to the position of governess and later as confidant with extraordinary skill.

Behold her now, dressed in a plain black gown, unadorned save for a white collar and cuffs, the very picture of rigid Puritanism.

There were few matters now in the Milbanke household on which Mrs. Clermont was not consulted. She knew all about their affairs. The time had passed when it was even remembered that she had washed the plates or peeled the potatoes below stairs.

"Mrs. Clermont," said Lady Milbanke, "to you I entrust my dear daughter. You shall be, as always, her adviser and guardian, should she ever need one. I send you with her, and remember that you represent me completely. I want you to keep a close watch on her. And also on Lord Byron. I mean as regards the household affairs. Money matters. You must write to me often."

Isabella looked up surprised.

"My dear child, my worries are many. I desire you to have Mrs. Clermont beside you and consult her in all matters of importance. Take your place as a woman of independent means and perform all your duties. But remember, we depend on you, my child, to check any extravagances on Byron's part and see to it that our prospects are not endangered."

Then she became emotional.

"In some thirty minutes you will no longer be a single woman. The ordeal is a very trying one for me."

She wept a few conventional tears into her handkerchief. Every mother is expected to cry when her daughter marries. Then, followed by Mrs. Clermont and Isabella, the one solemn and the other placid, they descended to the great bleak heavily furnished drawing-room.

Byron, who had arrived at Kirky Mallory the previous day, had passed a curious night. Trying to sleep, thinking, dozing, dreaming, waking up with a start, getting up and reading, being unable to concentrate, resisting with all his might a desire for laudanum and manfully conquering it, he arrived at the hour for dressing in a most unsatisfactory state of mind.

He had not been at all careful of himself for some time, on and off, since Mary's trouble. He had been burning the

candle at both ends, trying to blot out the memory of Hastings and all its tragedy and emotion. He had been everywhere, done everything, played a large part in London life, had been many Byrons in turn.

There was quite a collection of egos by this time wrapped up in that body of his. He had kept up bravely till now.

But this morning, on waking up, he felt as though he was going to die. He was unbearably depressed. His face was pale, with deep purple rings round his eyes and a nervous fluttering of the lids. He was disinclined to rise. A voice in his brain whispered many fears. If someone had announced that Isabella had changed her mind, he would have gone to sleep again with a sigh of relief, awaking a better man, freed from the growing cloud that had descended upon him. He rose unsteadily and found that his foot was more uncertain than ever, and his hands were trembling.

He looked at himself in the mirror, and a gleam of curious merriment entered his face.

"Good God, Fletcher!" he ejaculated; "what the devil are we going to do with a face like this?"

The valet made no response. He was solemn. He had his own thoughts, so he busied himself with preparations for the toilet, and was more attentive and solicitous than ever.

Byron lashed himself into life with cold water and, as it was icy, the weather being very inclement, he recovered, feeling a certain amount of vigour. His face had now a tinge of colour. But, although he felt better and was dressed as became the occasion, the terrible depression insisted on returning, and Mary haunted him.

He went over all the details of the affair in his mind. He saw her again as he had seen her in that awful hour—a distraught lunatic. He saw her as her own self, to him the loveliest in the world. He visualized her impossible home at Colwick Hall. Every phase of Mary came back to him. He could not lose her to-day. Nor could he rouse himself to try to banish her. Strange thoughts for his wedding day with Isabella. His mind was dazed.

He shook when Fletcher handed him his watch, and could not put it in his pocket.

"Fletcher," he said at last, "shall we run away?"

"Run away, my Lord?" said the man.

"Yes, to Italy. Wouldn't it be humorous if I failed to arrive in the drawing-room?"

Fletcher put his head on one side and cogitated deeply.

"Think of the young lady's feelings, my Lord," said he.

"Yes," murmured Byron, frowning; "after all it's her marriage as much as mine. But don't you think that running away would be best for all parties concerned?"

He spoke lightly, but every nerve in him longed to act on his own suggestion. Again he felt a net closing in around him.

"You are naturally nervous, my Lord," said Fletcher soothingly. "It always happens this way. I trembled all over when Ann became Mrs. Fletcher. Couldn't have told why, my Lord. It just happens so. Your Lordship will feel better the minute it's over."

Thus reassured, Byron smiled. Then turned to Fletcher.

"You will stay with me always?" he said.

"Can you doubt that, my Lord? So long as I continue to serve you to your taste and am approved of, I shall devote myself to you, my Lord. I don't know that I could serve another master. It's difficult to explain, my Lord," concluded Fletcher lamely, "but I hopes I continue to give satisfaction."

Byron stretched out his hand.

"Fletcher, you're one of nature's miracles," he said, shaking the long gaunt hand warmly. But as the remark was not pursued, Fletcher was not certain as to its meaning. He stood to attention as Byron limped out of the room, and when he had gone stood by the window saying little prayers, with big tears in his eyes.

He was not at all sure about this wedding. His Lordship had been out of sorts for the past fortnight and seemed very much worried. When they had arrived at Kirky Mallory, after delaying the arrival as much as possible by his master staying with Mrs. Leigh at Newmarket, Miss Milbanke had seemed rather distressed, her mother very suspicious, and the house was unbearingly oppressive.

Fletcher had a sensitive spirit. He could scent things like a dog. He knew when a place was unfriendly, and he detested this house.

The drawing-room where the wedding was to take place was large, solemn and gloomy. It was rarely used, for the Milbankes rarely entertained. It had that queer smell that unused rooms always become infected with sooner or later.

The clergyman was in waiting, very dignified and important in his voluminous black robe and white surplice, the book in his hand and his spectacles on the extreme tip of his nose.

Hobhouse was there, correct and attentive in his blue coat and precise lawn frill, his kind strong face expressing sympathy for all concerned.

Miss Milbanke was there, placid as ever.

Mrs. Clermont and Lady Milbanke stood by with their handkerchiefs ready for the moment tears were necessary.

But where was the bridegroom?

The clock was about to strike the hour, and Isabella glanced at it disapprovingly. She was the soul of punctuality herself.

"I trust Lord Byron is well," said Lady Milbanke.

"What's this? Byron ill?" said Sir Ralph, getting agitated.

"I am sure he is perfectly well, Sir Ralph," said Hobhouse, "but I expect he has not realized the hour. With your permission I will fetch him."

He hurried from the room with his heart sinking. What upon earth had happened? Was Byron really unwell? Had he suddenly left the house? It would be quite like him to do so. Had he forgotten the time? Worst of all, had he taken too much of that damnable drug and killed himself? Hobhouse thought of all these things as he went up to Byron's room.

Fletcher was busy putting things away.

"Is his Lordship here?" asked Hobhouse.

"No, sir, he went below some time ago. I saw him cross the path and walk round by them bushes soon afterwards. I think you'll find him in the grounds, Mr. Hobhouse."

With a sigh of relief the latter dashed downstairs and out into the wintry grounds where the black branches of trees reared towards a grey, snow-laded sky, and the dead leaves of autumn were lying wet and sodden on the paths.

He discovered Byron standing beside a desolate-looking pond, on which floated some flowerless liliums, the flat leaves of which were brown at the edge and the water about them unrefreshed and a slimy green.

"My dear fellow, you're waited for," cried Hobhouse as he approached.

Byron started and looked round wildly. Then collected himself.

"Here begins the new act," said he. "I hope I know my part."

He laughed, but there was no merriment in his voice, and his eyes looked unutterably sad.

" I'm sorry, Hobby," he said. " The atmosphere of the house is intolerable. So is my mother-in-law, by the way. I wanted air. I forgot the time. Come on, lead me to execution."

With this pleasantry and with an air of forced gaiety, he accompanied Hobhouse back to the house and soon faced the company. He apologized for his disappearance and assumed his Society manner at once. He had learned to act well. It was very useful at times. His foot was painful. He had been in agony with it all the morning, and his nerves were threadbare.

When the time came for the ceremony he knelt on a hard little cushion with Isabella beside him, and then . . . something happened.

The room closed in on him. . . . How was it he was in the Church at Hucknall Torkard ? . . . There he was, kneeling before the little altar, bright with flowers. The soft light of the windows tinged with blue and crimson. . . . There were people kneeling behind him. Augusta . . . he could feel it was her in the prettiest of frocks and holding some roses. And beside him, radiant in white shimmering silk, with a veil and blossoms on her hair, was Mary.

He could hear the clergyman speak the words. He responded, not knowing what he was saying. He took Mary's hand. He put the ring . . . his mother's ring—or was it not ?—upon her finger. He felt a hand touch his arm. It was Hobby. Yes, he had known Hobby was there. He had smiled at him a few minutes ago.

He closed his eyes. . . . The gaunt drawing-room returned. . . . Lady Milbanke was kissing her daughter. Sir Ralph was shaking his hand. Byron was saying something. He never knew what. Then he collected himself and felt stone cold. He signed numerous papers all in a dream.

Isabella was smiling and composed as ever and held him by the arm. There was to be no delay in the two departing for Halnaby, another house of Sir Ralph's, where they were to spend the honeymoon.

Isabella went up to change her dress. Byron and Hobhouse sought Fletcher and five minutes together. The rest talked in the drawing-room, except Mrs. Clermont, who had accompanied Lady Byron to her chamber.

" Well, Byron, it's over," said Hobhouse.

" Yes, I suppose it is," answered Byron. He looked ill, and

sank down in a chair as though he was going to faint. That vision of Hucknall had exhausted him.

"Fletcher, get some brandy," said Hobhouse. "Byron, you tumbled over the responses in admirable fashion."

"I wish I had tumbled into the pond," remarked Byron wearily.

He was calm when the time came for departure and everyone assembled in the hall to see them start.

Lady Byron was dressed in grey satin, trimmed with white fur, and carried a fur muff.

Hobhouse, bright and smiling, endeavoured to impart an air of happiness to the proceedings.

Lady Milbanke sniffed tears into her handkerchief as she stood beside her daughter. There was a great deal of advice and kissing, and much wishing of joy from papa and others.

Byron joined in all this as long as he was able. Then he walked apart with Hobhouse and stood by the carriage, talking in whispers.

All of a sudden he turned and said—

"Are you ready, Miss Milbanke?"

There was a gasp of astonishment from some, followed by silence. Lady Milbanke stared with horrified, steely eyes straight at him.

Isabella flushed a little. Sir Ralph looked surprised and Mrs. Clermont sneered. Then Hobhouse broke the spell by laughing at the mistake and the others joined him, joking at Byron's absent-mindedness. He was unconcerned. He had suffered too much to apologize and his nerves were on edge.

One thing cheered him up.

Hobhouse, fighting his own private emotions and misgivings, hugged Byron heartily and looked as though he would have kissed him, when, suddenly letting him go, he turned and embraced Isabella instead.

She blushed and looked modest and gratified, and Byron broke into the first boyish grin that had relaxed his features for days.

Hobhouse remained by the door and said good-bye.

"I hope, dear Lady Byron, that you will have every happiness," said he.

"It will be my own fault if I am not happy," she replied graciously. Her severe manner had relaxed somewhat. She appeared more charming, he thought. Perhaps she, too, had suffered from nervousness. Now that the ceremony was over

she became a trifle more responsive, and shook Hobhouse warmly by the hand.

But one thing was evident to the latter. Byron and Lady Milbanke had taken a strong dislike to each other. And the sinister-looking Clermont seemed rather an unpleasant blot on the scheme. Hobhouse felt, like Byron, that the air of the house was oppressive and disagreeable.

Byron held his friend's hand until the carriage drove away, and Hobhouse saw, with a returning heaviness of heart, the slender white fingers waving to him long after the carriage had left the house.

He was inexpressibly sad, and left Seaham thankfully. Lady Milbanke displeased him and Sir Ralph annoyed him. He was quite glad to return to London. Later on he met his friend, the Hon. Douglas Kinnaird.

"Hullo, my dear Hobby, what in the world is the matter with you?" he asked.

"I feel as though I had buried a friend," replied Hobhouse.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Well, Byron married Miss Milbanke on the second of this month. It has unaccountably depressed me."

"You ought to rejoice in seeing him anchored at last. It will save no end of trouble . . . particularly in certain circles," replied Kinnaird with meaning.

"I can see nothing but his eyes, Douglas," answered Hobhouse. "I shall not feel completely happy until I see them light up again as they used to do. He has not been himself since the proposal. It has worried me considerably."

Kinnaird laughed.

"You talk about Byron as if he was a baby or a woman. . . . I think he is a bit of both at heart. For the Lord's sake, come to Watier's and forget him."

"Thank you, I have a most important appointment," said Hobhouse with severe dignity, and swearing inwardly never to disclose his feelings again, he trotted off at a great rate, as if that said engagement had been made more urgent by his two minutes' talk with Douglas Kinnaird.

Hobhouse was the most profound sentimentalist ever born, but wild horses would never have made him admit it to himself.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Some six months later, when the stir and excitement caused by Byron's unexpected and hasty marriage had subsided, London became enthralled with a panic of excitement that swept away all personal matters for a time. Napoleon Bonaparte had fallen at last. The dreaded ogre of the world was defeated. Hopelessly and absolutely vanquished!

The victory of Waterloo swept like a great wind over Europe. Never again could the despot rise, phœnix-like, from the ashes of his overthrow.

The tumult of the past months, the return of Louis Bourbon to the throne of France for a short spell, Napoleon's banishment to Elba and his return like a phantom from the dead for a brief hundred days, had kept all hearts beating in fear. But now Waterloo had sounded his death-knell and the end of the long weary war.

It was good to be in London the day when the news arrived; to see the great masses of people forgetting their selfish little thoughts, their personal hopes and fears, and join in one great song of triumph. Every window was gay with flags and flowers. The streets were thronged. Rich and poor mingled together, laughing, singing, weeping for joy.

The crowd was so terrific that, but for the good nature that prevailed, there would have been danger to life and limb for those who were old or feeble. Children were passed from shoulder to shoulder to look at the great spectacle, the mail coaches, now dashing through the city from Lombard Street, to bear the news away to the country. Club windows were thronged with excited men who leaned out and waved their hands to friends below in the crowd. Bugles were blowing, bands playing away in the distance, and cries of "Wellington" and "Waterloo" were heard on every side.

The spectre of war took wings and fled away. The lists of the slain and injured had not yet fully arrived. No one cared to ask for full details of the battle. All hoped that their own special hero would come back to them.

John Cam Hobhouse found himself wedged in by the top of St. James' Street, and suddenly recognized Scrope Davies a little way from him.

" Hullo, Hobby, isn't it glorious ? " shouted Scrope to him ; " can you reach me ? "

Hobhouse nodded and slowly pushed his way through the bystanders, who looked up at his sad, handsome face. It commanded attention and respect instantly. He was very pale, but bore himself with great dignity. Scrope Davies was too excited to notice the tragic look in his face.

" The mails are coming. . . . What a day ! Where's Byron ? He ought to be with us," said Scrope.

" No, not here," said Hobhouse ; " it wouldn't be very safe for him with his foot to be in this crush. I expect he's there somewhere." He pointed up at the club windows.

" Seen anything of him lately ? " cried Davies. The din was increasing. The other shook his head.

Just then loud ringing cheers broke out in the distance. What a volley ! How they thrilled the blood to hear them ! Nearer and nearer every second. Horns rang out. Cries were raised.

" Clear the way there for the mails."

There was a sound of horses' hoofs thundering along. Outriders dashed ahead. The people scattered as quickly as possible. Then the coaches came into view.

It was a perfect spectacle.

They were decked in flowers, wreaths and laurels, filled with passengers who cheered to the onlookers and threw money out right and left. The gorgeous livery of the coach and footmen made a gallant show.

But best of all were the horses, leaping forward with a joyous bound. They seemed to palpitate with pride as they galloped ahead. On they dashed through such a storm of cheering. It sounded like the great waves of the ocean hurling themselves on the shore in a mighty storm.

The front coach seats were occupied to-day by gentlemen of high rank, but all class distinctions were forgotten. One bond alone between them all. A nation's pride !

" England for ever ! "

Away they go, the spectators greeting the coaches by name, for all are known.

" Hooray, Winchester ! Look out, here's Bristol. No, that one's Gloucester," cried folks to each other as the coaches

rushed past bearing their tidings to the great ancestral cities—news of joy, ay, and sorrow.

For many cheeks must be blanched and many hearts torn with grief when the dreaded lists come out.

But away with gloom and foreboding on such a day as this.

"Well, Hobhouse, what do you think of it?" cried Scrope, after waving his hat frantically and shouting himself hoarse for a quarter of an hour. "Say, where shall we go to celebrate? I'm due at Watier's if I can get there."

"I believe you live at Watier's," responded Hobhouse. The crowd was beginning to break up now, so it was easier to walk together.

"Rather! I want my revenge," laughed Scrope. I dropped thirty thousand there last week between Tuesday and Saturday."

Hobhouse sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Scrope, my friend, is there no cure for your gambling fever?"

"None but winning," replied the irrepressible one. "Never mind about me, Hobby. Where's Byron to-day?"

"I have been asking myself that question for weeks," was the unexpected reply.

"Do you know what I did the day I heard that Byron had got married?" asked Scrope as they walked down Piccadilly.

"No; what did you do?" said Hobhouse with a smile.

"Got hopelessly drunk. I felt awful; 'pon my word, I hate losing my friends. Poor Byron's finished now," said Scrope.

"Well, that's a cheerful outlook on the matter, I must say," responded Hobhouse, amused in spite of himself. Scrope looked at him dismally.

"Hobby, marriage is a lottery, anyway. I feel that Byron's is a catastrophe. Why, no one knew he had proposed! Why was the thing rushed through so secretly?"

"I assure you the engagement was well advertised in the papers; perhaps you did not read them," answered Hobhouse, drily.

"Poor old fellow!" continued Scrope. "He never told any of us, anyway. I don't believe he had a single friend present."

"Wrong! I was there," said Hobhouse briefly.

"Were you, though? Well, I hope the lady's worthy of

Byron, whoever she is," replied Scrope. " I say, Hobby, what is she like ? "

" Very estimable and ladylike," answered Hobhouse non-commitally. Scrope grinned.

" Sounds deadly dull. I do hope he isn't going to settle down into a horrible respectability and all that sort of thing. It will spoil his career."

" Yes, I suppose it would be much worse than drinking or gambling," said Hobhouse quietly. Scrope looked at him to see if the words had been spoken in sarcasm. At that moment they entered the club.

Gaming had been suspended for the time. There was plenty of drinking, laughing and talking.

" Napoleon was killed outright, so I hear," said one man ; " gad, what a relief ! "

" Do you know, I should rather doubt that report," said Hobhouse.

" Anyway, he's flying for his life," said another. Everyone knew something about the fallen Emperor, and each was sure that what he had heard was correct.

" A fitting end for such a monster ! " said Lord Alvanley.

" I don't agree," interposed Sheridan, who was sober for once by way of celebrating the victory. " What do you say, Hobhouse ? "

" No, Napoleon's will be a name to conjure with when we are all dust," answered Hobhouse. " The French don't realize that now."

" By Jove ! I believe he's still a hero to you, Hobby," said Scrope.

Hobhouse grew thoughtful.

" Not quite, Scrope. But if you had seen him in Paris a few months ago, as I did, you might understand what I mean. There's a something supernatural about Napoleon, explain it how you will. He raised France from the most appalling chaos in history. And I for one shall never forget the impression he made on me when I saw him review his Guards."

The other men gathered round and listened with growing interest.

" The soldiers went mad about him directly he appeared," continued Hobhouse. " I was lucky enough to get a full view of him as he rode down the line on his white horse. He was dressed, of course, in the famous grey coat. It gave a spectral tint to his curious pallid face. Such a countenance !

I tell you there was inflexibility, emotion, even vision, all blended in that one look. The afternoon sun shone full on his face. He looked unearthly. There's no other word to express it. In his queer, frozen way he was magnetic. He repelled yet drew you towards him. But he never felt quite human to me. The men were all alive with excitement—shouting, cheering, and many of them were crying."

As Hobhouse proceeded he grew more intense. His worship of Napoleon was so well known that he lent his own earnestness to the description, and all the listeners waited for him to proceed.

"He came to a pause when he saw the Old Guards. Then for once he smiled. If that man has any human feeling left in him, it came out to those battered old veterans. One of them broke through the line and rushed up to him with a petition in his hand. Napoleon said something and embraced him. One felt he was father more than Emperor to the soldier."

"Hobhouse, heard the news? The Guards were cut to pieces before his eyes," interposed Lord Alvanley.

Hobhouse uttered an exclamation and turned away.

"Anyway," continued Alvanley, "one man's ambition counts for very little where millions of lives are concerned. God! what a holocaust of victims he has left behind him. They should haunt him to the end of his days, if he still lives."

"They will," said Hobhouse, turning back; "with those eyes they will. No one need doubt that."

"Come along," Scrope cried. "Let's all drink to Waterloo and good old Wellington." The other men cheered. "I say, Hobhouse, you're not going?"

"Yes, if you will all excuse me," said Hobhouse, bowing to the company.

Scrope rushed up to him.

"Oh, I say, Hobby, you must stay and join us. Come along, get drunk just this once to celebrate."

Hobhouse put the friendly arm away and spoke very sadly.

"Not to-day, gentlemen. I must ask you to excuse me," he said with great dignity. "I have had bad news this morning. My brother, Captain Hobhouse, has been killed."

There were murmurs of sympathy and a hush fell on those nearest him. It gradually spread through the room.

Scrope was all penitence.

" My dear old fellow, I'm so sorry. Forgive me, won't you ? "

Hobhouse was moving to the door.

" It's all right, Scrope. Just you go back to the others. Rejoice all you can in the victory." He straightened himself and bit his lip. " Yes, it's a great day for England. Good-bye." With that he smiled at the other and slowly passed out.

It was still crowded in the streets but less congested than it had been. He found his way back to his own rooms and sat down to write to Byron and tell him the news of his loss.

The recollection of that wedding day came back again.

" Why, it's three months since I had a line from him," he said aloud. He could see Byron, looking more dead than alive, staring into that dismal pond. Then, kneeling beside his bride with a far-away dazed expression. He remembered the haunting misery in his great blue eyes.

He had only received short notes since them, and had been too busy with his own political work to call as he had wished. When he had done so once Byron was not at home. Was anything wrong ?

" Hobby, I am longing to be under the blue skies of Italy once more. Take my advice. Never marry ! "

" He mustn't make another blunder. It would utterly ruin his life," said the great generous-hearted Hobhouse to himself. " God forbid his marriage should be a disaster."

He tried to write a letter, tore it up, and finally determined to call at Byron's house, 13, Piccadilly, the following day.

* * * * * *

It was past ten o'clock the following evening when Hobhouse left Westminster and betook himself to Byron's residence. The door was opened by the worthy Fletcher, who beamed with pleasure on seeing him.

" Is his Lordship at home ? "

" No, Mr. Hobhouse, but he may soon return. Shall I inform Lady Byron that you are here ? "

Hobhouse pondered.

" It's rather late to disturb her Ladyship," he said.

" She will not retire before eleven o'clock, sir."

" In that case I shall be very pleased to have a word with her, if she is not engaged."

Hobhouse entered the hall and Fletcher closed the door and led the way upstairs. It was a large house. Byron had rented it from Her Grace the Duchess of Devonshire.

"Will you kindly step in here, Mr. Hobhouse?" said the valet, showing the way into a lofty room lighted with a profusion of candles and with a good fire burning in the open grate.

The former glanced round approvingly. The general air of comfort, homeliness and elegance pleased him well. The deep-seated arm-chairs were covered with warm-coloured brocade. The hangings on which the firelight sparkled up were a rich rose. Hobhouse suddenly felt emotional. Byron had a home of his own at last. How he had longed to see his friend settled and happy! Surely there could be nothing seriously wrong. He was rather surprised, however, at the absence of flowers. The chambers at 8 St. James' Street had been rather over-profuse in that direction. But the utter lack of them struck Hobhouse as curious.

Some books lay on the table. He examined them idly.

The Existence of the Soul in a Future State. He laid it down and took up another with a smile. *The Doctrines of the Punishment. Hell and Heaven.*

"Dear, dear!" said Hobhouse, and took up a third.

Principles of Daily Conduct for the Christian Believer.

"Rather severe reading for a young bride," thought he. The door opened and Isabella Byron entered.

She had certainly developed a little more style, and moved with dignity to greet him. She was dressed in a sombre gown of dull grey that fell to her feet. It was quite unadorned save for a narrow lace collar. She wore no jewellery save her wedding ring. Hobhouse looked at the colourless face. It looked hard and set, he thought. His heart sank a little, but he bowed over her hand and spoke with warmth.

"It is indeed most kind of you to spare me time for a chat," he said. "I must apologize for calling so late. I was detained at the House and hoped to catch Byron before I returned home."

Isabella sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

"I fear you will consider me a poor substitute for Lord Byron." Her voice was as hard as steel. Hobhouse glanced at her in surprise. "I can give you no indication whatever of the time he may return," she added with a slight sneer. "He is out now at all hours at the theatre and elsewhere."

This was a nice beginning. Hobhouse tried to break down the hostility he felt in the air.

Had he known her better he might not have been surprised, for Isabella Byron, among other peculiarities, possessed one

well known to her friends. She was apt suddenly to "freeze," as they would express it. One day she would be fairly agreeable and the next as cold as ice. This mood had developed considerably since her marriage, and the servants, who worshipped Byron for his kindness and consideration, had grown to dislike "her Ladyship."

Another disturbing factor was her growing tendency to devote herself to what she considered "charity." So she professed an overwhelming interest and devotion in the cause of the oppressed slaves abroad, but had no time to extend sympathy or cultivate any real understanding of the complex nature of Byron.

She was likewise fanatically "religious." Professed the creed of the "Socinians." A strange one, insomuch as these people deny the divinity of our Lord. But Isabella was quite assured of her own salvation, and studied theology and philosophy deeply.

That being the case, it was an unfortunate omission that led her to neglect the works of Swedenbourg. There she might have learnt that the Socinians were considered as "blasphemers who might expect no mercy in this world or the next." Clearly her soul was in some little danger. But unconscious of the fact, she was expending much thought on others' future welfare to the detriment of her own. The fanatical mind becomes hardened, and from that state is capable of vicious malignity. There is no woman who does more harm in the world than the one who develops self-righteous and puritanical principles. From her such evil is wrought in the lives of others that the very angels must look down and weep.

Such a nature was Isabella Byron's. But Hobhouse, who looked at the hard young face with pity, attributed her present coldness to a fit of nerves excusable in a young wife, still inexperienced and suffering from an exaggerated notion of neglect.

"So Lord Byron is out a great deal," he said pleasantly; "that is but natural. He has a great position in Society. I suppose you accompany him sometimes. Often, I would say," he added.

"No, I have no love for the theatre. I find enough pretence at home," she answered sullenly.

With a firm determination to break down this barrier, Hobhouse launched into an animated talk on the victory of

Waterloo, the question of Napoleon's death or flight, the coming ball at Lady Jersey's, and the increased popularity of Byron's poems.

She listened in polite silence.

"I have no love for social gaiety," she said at last; "besides Newstead is still unsold. I presume you know that, Mr. Hobhouse."

He looked at her in surprise.

"There is no need for anxiety on that score," he replied. "By the way, have you seen Lady Melbourne lately?"

"No. Byron has asked me to go repeatedly, and I have always refused."

"Refused to visit your aunt! Why?" he questioned.

Jealousy flashed from her eyes as she spoke.

"I consider it most unfitting for me to go there and meet certain people. No doubt Byron finds great entertainment there."

"Good heavens! she's growing horribly like Lady Noel already," thought Hobhouse. Aloud he said:

"My dear Lady Byron, there is nothing to fear at Melbourne House, I am sure. But I shall scold Byron for leaving you so much alone."

"Mr. Hobhouse, I have grown to expect no consideration from Byron. I do my duty. That is all."

"Come, come, this is surely wrong," said Hobhouse. "Why, how long have you two been married? A few months."

"Long enough to realize that he and I are many miles apart." Then she checked herself and added quickly, "But you are his friend and therefore defender."

"My dear Lady Byron," said Hobhouse gently, "I can realize that as Byron's wife you may experience trials. I know his nature well. But, believe me, there is great happiness in store for you both when you grow to understand one another more. You must go out with him, interest yourself in his friends, his work. That is your real duty," he added firmly. "I will never believe there is anything wrong that sympathy and love cannot right again."

"Love!" Isabella shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, he would insult me by his passion if I permitted it. He pretended to care for me a little at first. But love! . . . Please do not be absurd, Mr. Hobhouse."

He looked at her in alarm.

"Byron needs love and great understanding. You have

married the most exceptional man of his age. His future happiness, even his work, lie in your hands. Oh, Lady Byron, what a privilege it is to guide a man of his genius. With all his faults, and I know he has many, he could make you happy and proud. He has suffered terribly in the past. There are deep wounds in his heart he will reveal to few. There, I tell you that as a secret. But do not, I beg of you, continue in this mood. Give out to him. Expand your own nature. He will gain more strength from you, and you will gain more riches than you dream of. That is marriage. Each soul helping the other, bearing with the other. Never judging. Never condemning."

His splendid face was aglow with a noble fervour as he spoke. He realized now that Byron's one anchor was already drifting. This hard, cold young creature could make or mar him.

"I could help him!" said Isabella scornfully. "I did not wed Lord Byron to wait on his moods and lower my own self-esteem. It is he who should and must wait on me. The wife must be first."

Hobhouse smiled sadly.

"Oh, you are so young to speak like this, Lady Byron."

"One is never too young to have firm principles of conduct," she answered.

For answer Hobhouse took up the books lying on the table.

"The secret of love is not found in theoretical books," he said quietly. "It is found on close observation, but that must be based on love . . . and, pardon me . . . a little humility."

She started and looked at him indignantly.

"My dear, I am old enough to advise you," he said. "I have but one wish. To see you and Byron happy. You are steering a wrong course already. Stay it before it is too late."

"Oh, you speak to me as his friend," she cried.

Hobhouse crossed and took her hands, looking into her face.

"And yours—yours too. Believe that. My dear, you have married a genius, the foremost poet of his age. You must realize what that means. He is no ordinary man. You must not expect to find Byron like the friends you have left behind in Durham. They may be calm, methodical men, like myself. But his mind is so fashioned that at times great flames sweep across it. I have seen him write. He is animated by a spirit stronger than mortal. Then, after that tremendous uplift, what comes? . . . reaction . . . a relapse into the depths.

You and I cannot quite follow it, but we can learn to understand. For genius the way is hard in this world of ours. Oh, we take the work they give us, read and enjoy it, feel ourselves proud to possess it ; but do we quite realize the debt we owe to the mind that has wrought out that work : to the depth of emotion, and its reaction on the mortal frame ? Then add all that to a nature such as Byron's, who has suffered from boyhood. No real mother's love ; his constant lameness and all its misery . . . other sorrows as well. Temptations such as you could never experience. Oh, my dear, you can grow into such a grand woman if you would but be content to give your girlish love and tender pity to such a nature as his. And the world will bless you, for his work will expand a thousand fold. Is that not a glorious privilege ? I tell you, you are the most envied bride in London.

She remained passive during his speech. Looked down and then away. When he released her hands she glanced up at the clock, and said pointedly :

" I fear you will miss Lord Byron to-night."

There was nothing for it but to take the obvious hint, and Hobhouse took his leave in complete despair. Clearly things were going all astray already.

" I can see Lady Noel's influence at work already," he said ; " I'm sure of it. What can be her object in creating such a breach between them already ? "

The door had scarcely closed on Hobhouse when another one opened, and Mrs. Clermont glided in.

It was characteristic of this faithful and devoted creature that her intense vigilance and care for her " dear young lady " went hand in hand with abject humility of bearing. She also had the curious habit of entering a room before anyone was aware of it. Her errand done, she would disappear again as noiselessly as she had entered.

She stood now looking at Isabella, who was standing by the fire, and quickly moving to her side touched her on the arm.

" Your Ladyship ! "

Isabella started.

" Oh, is that you, Mrs. Clermont ? "

The other smiled, put her finger to her lips and went to the door by which Hobhouse had entered, opened it and looked out.

" Really, you are too absurd," said Isabella ; " did you expect to find him listening outside the room ? "

" No, but I never trust Fletcher and the other servants."

Mrs. Clermont's remark seemed to irritate her mistress.

" Please spare me your foolish quarrels with the servants," she replied. " I have far more important worries on my mind now."

" Oh, pardon, my Lady, if I seem anxious," said the other in a wheedling tone ; " but as things are now, one has to be very careful. I hope you did not trust Mr. Hobhouse too much. Of course, all Lord Byron does is sure to be perfect in his eyes."

" You are right there," replied Isabella bitterly. " I have had to listen to long lectures on his ' wonderful nature,' and advice on my duty as a young wife."

" What insolence ! . . . to lecture you ! . . . Let him talk to his Lordship. Lord Byron ought to be ashamed of his ways. Lying in bed till one o'clock in the day, leaving you to dine alone, and neglecting you shamefully. And, worst of all, he is fast bringing you down to beggary. Of course he spends his money on women at the theatre ; or else he gives it to his sister, Augusta Leigh. A pretty business, I must say," cried Clermont.

Isabella looked around quickly.

" Lower your voice, Clermont ; someone might hear you."

" My Lady, imagine you allowing him to make his will in favour of that woman ! You should have seen your mother's face when she read your letter. She was mad with rage. Why did you agree to it when you were at Newmarket ? "

" I never thought," answered Isabella bitterly. " Of course, I see now why she pretended to be so fond of me. And Byron told me that I was provided for already."

" So you are, my Lady, to a certain extent, but, as Lady Milbanke says, that will be of little use to her and your poor father. Sir Ralph can never recover his position now. Your mother is worried night and day. What was the use of your marrying Lord Byron unless he could help you to provide for your parents ? Then for his sister to be his heiress instead ! No wonder your mother is so furious."

" Well, it can't be helped now," said Isabella. She lived in fear of her mother's temper, and her father's mismanagement of his own affairs was making things look very serious at her home, Kirkby Mallory. Moreover, she dreaded poverty herself, and the knowledge of Byron's heavy bills incensed her more every day.

" Mrs. Clermont, when you do look over Lord Byron's desk, be careful Fletcher does not find you there. It would make it very awkward for me," she said suddenly.

" And for me too, your Ladyship. He would send me away, but I must do my duty. Your dear mother told me I was to watch and find out all I could about Lord Byron's money affairs."

" It is very good of you," answered Isabella. " You are my only friend in this house. I lean on you now my mother is not with me."

A strange admission for one so self-possessed and cold as Lady Byron.

" Clermont, I really think the best way would be for me to have a thorough understanding with his Lordship about this business. What is the matter ? Why do you look like that ? "

The woman's face was livid at that moment.

" My Lady, if Lord Byron was to turn on me and accuse me of making trouble . . ."

Like all creatures of her kind, Mrs. Clermont had her own interest at stake. She had risen from a low position. By extraordinary chance she had worked her way up as the " governess " in the Milbanke family. But she knew Lady Milbanke well enough to realize that her future chance of favour lay in carrying out that lady's directions without any blundering. If she was to be still " the trusted confidant " she must perform her spying very carefully. To a woman of low birth and no education it was a chance in a thousand to be in such a position of trust. And, as it chanced, both Lady Noel and Isabella were exceptional women. They could and did allow Clermont privileges that any ordinary lady in their position would only have allowed to a relation or a social equal. But then it was very useful for Lady Milbanke to have a woman who would do the work she could not do in all decency for herself, and she had taken an intense dislike to Byron at the wedding.

Clermont, buoyed up with hopes of becoming a permanent member of the Milbanke household and thus provided for for life, knew that if Byron discovered her prying into his letters he would possibly send her off there and then. It would not be consistent with Lady Milbanke's policy to betray her own share in the scheme, and she would either have to defend her own spy or stand condemned for her treachery on her own account.

Byron's direct method of looking through her made Clermont distinctly uncomfortable at times. And her base nature made her hate " his Lordship " heartily on her own account. She had also the usual vanity of her kind. To be actually concerned in the domestic secrets of people of quality appealed to her as highly profitable. Had Sir Ralph been a man of strong character and ambition, in all possibility Lady Milbanke would have needed no confidant. He was merely a weak, vapid, foolish old man and governed entirely by the women of the house. So Mrs. Clermont's weekly report of the doings at 13, Piccadilly were despatches of great importance. From the moment Byron had made Augusta Leigh his heiress in order to provide for Mary's child, Judith Milbanke became Augusta's enemy. Much writing of letters and plotting had been going on now for months past in secret, and the atmosphere of 13, Piccadilly was already charged with hostility and suspicion. Fletcher had grown to dislike Mrs. Clermont and was always well on her track when he discovered her prowling about passages or near " his Lordship's study," but up to now the latter had managed to evade discovery.

Isabella looked now at her " confidant " in surprise. It was not usual for Mrs. Clermont to display any emotion– least of all fear.

" You are my servant, not his," she replied. " I speak formally. It will not do for you to appear more than that here for fear of arousing jealousy amongst the other servants."

" They are jealous, all of them, and that man Fletcher hates me."

" Well, be discreet," answered Isabella coldly. " I want no scene with his Lordship on your account."

" Then, my Lady," said Clermont in agitation, " for your own sake, my dear young lady, I beg of you do not speak to him to-night. He may come in worse for drink. He might even be violent. Oh, my Lady, think of your coming ordeal. For the sake of your little child, do not expose yourself to any distress."

Isabella saw the point.

" Yes, I must take great care of my health now," she said. " These late hours are bad for me, I know. My physician has quite forbidden me to go out in the evenings."

" His Lordship cares precious little for your health," sneered Clermont. " If it was his sister, now—oh, that would be a very different matter, I dare say."

Isabella considered.

"He certainly seems to think a great deal of Mrs. Leigh," she remarked. "He is always talking of her."

"What did you think of her at Newmarket?" asked Clermont, looking at her curiously.

"Oh, she was very civil and kind to me, of course, but the house is really very untidy. Her children run up and down stairs just as they like. Of course, you know Colonel Leigh gambles. I found her far too much disposed to laugh and talk with his Lordship when a more serious demeanour would have been, to my mind, becoming. She is far too eager to keep Lord Byron in a good humour than advise him as a sister should."

"Is she pretty?" asked Clermont.

"That is as people would say. I do not like that type myself," answered Isabella coldly.

"I suppose she was brought up with his Lordship?"

"No; from what I can gather, she never saw him for years. She is only his half-sister, you know. Lord Byron's father was married twice."

"Only his half-sister," repeated Mrs. Clermont musingly. "Then if anything did happen to his Lordship any time, I should think your Ladyship could contest that will."

"I never thought of that," said Isabella. "Of course he consulted me and asked my permission before he did it, and I, like a stupid, consented."

"That will in favour of Mrs. Leigh must not stand for good," said Clermont. "I believe Lady Milbanke is going to get legal advice on the subject."

Isabella shrugged her shoulders.

"At present there are more immediate matters to think of."

Mrs. Clermont smiled and folded her hands.

"Pardon me, your Ladyship, that is where I can advise you. You know that by law the husband can always claim any money coming to the wife. Now, as your dear mother says, when your uncle, Lord Wentworth, dies, if he makes you his heiress—and there is every chance of it—his money cannot come to you without benefiting his Lordship. In the meantime his sister gets almost all the money he dies possessed of. We have to look ahead. I have told you what a pile of bills I discovered in the study—oh, very carefully kept out of sight, so that your Ladyship should not see them if you went in there. What of your future? It's a very serious matter. We cannot

afford to sit down and wait for you to be beggared. So, my Lady, I really must still do what I can for your dear mother here. She will look after you if the worst came."

"What then?" asked Isabella. "I cannot follow you."

"My Lady, whatever happens in this house, I must ask you to see that I am not discharged. How can I watch over your interests if you would not protect me? I mean . . ." she paused and became confused. "The other day I could have sworn that Fletcher was watching me when I went down at night to the study. Of course, I went along to my own room. But if he should accuse me . . . I should have to ask your protection. I am only working in your interests and by your dear mother's commands."

"It's all right, Mrs. Clermont, I understand. Yes, matters are very serious. Only do be careful how you find out things. Try to avoid discovery at all costs. I can see how important it is that someone should watch Lord Byron. And as matters are strained between us now, I prefer to keep my own rooms. I do not mind what you do. I trust your zeal and affection for me. But do not be imprudent."

Mrs Clermont beamed.

"No, no. I promise you."

"I am so tired," said Isabella after a pause. "Come with me and help me to undress. It is past eleven."

Leaning on the arm of her faithful attendant, she left the room and went upstairs to bed. Mrs. Clermont helped her to disrobe, put her into a wrap, and after brushing her hair for the night, withdrew.

Some time afterwards Fletcher was in his Lordship's dressing-room stirring the fire. He heard a well-known knock at the front door. He hurried out on the landing, which was in semi-darkness. As he descended the stairs he stopped and looked towards the library. The heavy brocaded curtains were moving. He was sure of it. Yet there was no wind to account for it at all.

"Hullo, that's rum," he said aloud.

The knock was repeated once, and then several times. Fletcher hurried down and paused on the last stair. He was divided between the desire to investigate the curtains and to answer his master's knock. Another loud double one decided it. With a last look in the other direction, he hurried to the door and unbolted it. The hall was flooded with moonlight.

A cloaked figure, hatless and swaying heavily, limped in.

One glance at the weary, drawn face and the mass of tumbled curls brought the valet to Byron's assistance. His stick fell with a clatter on the marble floor. In another instant he would have fallen likewise but for Fletcher's protecting arm. He helped to steady him, picked up the stick and replaced it in the nervous hand, and skilfully guided him up the stairs in the direction of his own room. It was reached at last, and Byron sank wearily into an arm-chair.

"Lucky there's a good fire; his hands are as cold as ice," thought the valet. He kept the door wide open and pricked up his ears at the sound of a stealthy footstep hurrying past.

Byron was lying back with his eyes closed, half asleep. In another second the sound of a door shutting on another landing was distinctly heard.

Byron stirred and opened his eyes.

"Who's that? Her Ladyship?" he asked.

"No, your Lordship; one of the servants returning to their room, I think," answered Fletcher quietly. He looked very grim as he closed the door and drew the curtain across. Then he looked down at the limp, inert figure in the chair.

"It's no use speaking to-night," thought he. "If I'd been a minute sooner I could have caught her this time and put him on his guard. It's a shame, that's what it is, such doings! I wish I was like Mr. Hobhouse or one of his friends, and could speak free and open to him. They have the right."

But no one, not even John Cam Hobhouse, could have done more than the faithful Fletcher did night after night, for he spent his best endeavours in trying to persuade his master not to unlock a certain drawer in the dressing-table, where a phial of laudanum was always within easy reach. He would suggest food, try to turn his Lordship's thoughts in another direction, even brave a severe rebuke at times. All to no purpose. The deadly work begun by Caroline Lamb was bearing sad fruit. Forgetfulness is all too soon obtained by the drug. To a weary and nervous mind its lure is often irresistible.

"It ain't drugs he wants," thought Fletcher. "It's love and sympathy. Why don't her Ladyship try to understand him better? She's all wrapped up with herself and that cursed woman half the time. She ain't got no heart."

He had thought the same thing a hundred times since the day of the wedding. He stood looking down sorrowfully on his hero, and there were tears of affection in his honest eyes.

The glory of the brilliant young Lord Byron of Newstead Abbey in all his boyish idealism and beauty had departed. The languid, elegant idol of Society was passing also, and a tragic, disappointed and reckless being was slowly evolving in their place.

But to Fletcher, Byron was no different. Of late there had been many sad nights, many volcanic outbursts of temper, and at times, when only the valet knew, outbursts of hysterical weeping. Her Ladyship was far too absorbed in her charitable work to care or inquire why Byron was so often absent from her company. She had no time for " moods." Her own were so far more important.

But Fletcher, like a dog, knew when trouble was in the air. When the other servants went off to bed, he would quietly betake himself to the hall and wait for sound of the limping step. It seemed but yesterday that he had done the same in dear old Newstead Abbey for the " young master."

Byron was always the same to him. His was a service far more precious than gold. He was to follow the pilgrim many weary miles on strange journeys. He kept his counsel. *The silence of true love and loyalty ! Not, as Isabella Byron's was to be, of hate, hypocrisy and greed !*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A FEW weeks later Hobhouse and Byron were seated in the library.

"I had no idea you were in such trouble with these," said Hobhouse, pointing to a pile of bills that lay on the desk.

"Things look really very serious," he added sympathetically, as he looked at the thin, worn face that had aged since he last saw it.

"Ever since my marriage every creditor I have has been dunning me to death," said Byron. "They are under the impression that I have come into a large fortune, I think." He rose and went over to the desk, taking up a pile of the papers. "Look at these, my son. I see myself in prison for debt one of these days."

"Oh, not so bad as that!" said Hobhouse with a smile. "But it is very hard on you. I hoped you had found a little peace from this sort of trouble, anyway."

"From no sort, Hobby," was the quick retort. "Take my advice and never marry. Mind, I haven't a word to say against Belle, not a word," he added, so emphatically that it was strangely out of place at that moment. So he might have spoken had his hearer questioned the statement. He looked at Hobhouse as he spoke and seemed to be very anxious to convince him that everything was well in that quarter. His friend remained silent and waited for more confidences. Byron limped about the room in his restless fashion. It was evident that his foot was giving him some pain. It always did when he was suffering from agitation.

"Yes, Hobby, I am sure Belle does her best. Of course, she's very young yet, isn't she? And I suppose this town life is strange to her. Her people have let her study too much. She's been brought up like a Methodist, too. It has made her narrow. She can't understand life at all. It makes things . . . well, rather difficult. But that's nothing," he added hurriedly. "It's this load of debt that is driving me half

crazy. What I say is, never marry unless you're free of that. It doubles one's responsibilities and plays the devil."

"Does Lady Byron know about all this?" asked Hobhouse.

Byron shook his head.

"No. Do you think I would worry her with it?"

"Does she guess?" said Hobhouse quietly. Byron looked at him in surprise.

"No. What do you mean? How should she?"

"Hum!" was the thoughtful rejoinder. If Isabella was in total ignorance of these difficulties, why did she harp so much on money when he saw her, wondered Hobhouse. Also, why was Lady Judith in town now? He had seen her yesterday and that worthy woman had spoken to him, railing at her son-in-law most fiercely because Newstead was still unsold; hinting that Byron had never intended to sell, and furiously angry because the money that had now come to the Milbanke family from her uncle, Lord Wentworth, must eventually come to Byron, or at least some part of the marriage settlements. The remembrance of her words, "Understand, Mr. Hobhouse, we are not going to stand by and allow Lord Byron to beggar Isabella or her family," rankled still in his mind. But he could not broach that subject to Byron, who disliked his mother-in-law quite enough already. It would not help matters by embittering the relations between these two, who at first sight of each other had been conscious of a mutual hostility. So Hobhouse held his peace for the time.

"By the way, I called on the day we heard of Waterloo and had a little talk with your wife. Did she mention it?" he said.

Byron shook his head.

"No. What did she say?" he asked.

"She seemed a little lonely and, I thought, unhappy at being left by herself so much," said Hobhouse tactfully. "Is it wise to do that too much, Byron? A young wife naturally likes to have company."

"Belle is different. She hates society and going out. She positively refuses to go to Melbourne House at all, even to see Lady Melbourne, and as for the theatre," he threw up his hands with a gesture of mock despair, "why, my dear fellow, she thinks I am on the way to perdition for going there at all. Oh, I assure you, I get plenty of lectures on the state of my soul."

"Very right and proper! I hope they do you good,"

laughed Hobhouse, trying to turn the matter into a joke and failing. Byron frowned angrily.

"Augusta did her best to make me a Christian, and she has not succeeded yet. I can endure Belle, but her friends make me long to say things. You must come one day to some of these godly tea parties. I suppose it isn't fair to speak like that, but I long to take her abroad and broaden her mind. The only fault Belle has is her narrowness."

Hobhouse nodded. There was a good deal of sound common sense in the suggestion of travel. He hoped Byron would carry out his intention.

"In the meantime, just to keep myself out of mischief, if I can, I am working hard on the Drury Lane Committee," said Byron with a flash of his old waggishness. "The scenes we have there! Authors going mad because we cannot produce their confounded plays. One man wants to light the theatre with gas and poison us all. Essex rushing up and down to Kean's dressing-room and trying to induce him to keep sober."

"I hope he has succeeded," said Hobhouse.

"Not a bit of it! He's been more drunk than ever," said Byron laughing. "But, by Jove! it hasn't injured his acting. That is better every week. Peter Moore is always weeping over the profits, or rather the lack of them! Kinnaird has to soothe Raymond's wounded pride and get him to play second part to Kean."

"It sounds quite thrilling."

"Oh, very," said Byron. "Sometimes I get utterly sick of it, but I must pass the time somehow, and I can't afford to entertain here just now. Amusement, my friend: that's the best way to kill care!"

This sounded less hopeful than ever to Hobhouse. When a newly married man has to plunge into outside distraction to keep himself occupied, it argues clouds on the horizon at home.

"You must not forget that you are not a bachelor now," he said. "Lady Byron, being averse to drama, will not approve of your going to the theatre so much."

Byron yawned, stretched himself and sat down; took up some papers, read them through and flung them aside; then suddenly looked at his friend.

"What a callous beast you must think me, Hobby," he said with great feeling. "I did not answer your letter about

your brother. Frankly, Hobby, I didn't know what to say. Words seem so little in such cases. But I feel for you with all my heart." He rose as he spoke and moved over to Hobhouse.

"Thank you, Byron. I quite understand," said the latter, sadly. "Yes, he was the flower of our little family. The best of men! Too modest about his own merits. It often stood in the way of his promotion. I blame myself that I never did more to help him when he was alive."

"My dear Hobby, what else could you have done?"

"Nothing, I suppose, and yet one always feels like that towards the dead."

"I feel sure you have nothing whatever to reproach yourself with," said Byron gently. "There's nothing on earth you would not do for anyone. You often make me feel a selfish creature, always bothering about my own troubles. Heaven knows you've had your own share." He put his arm round the other's shoulder.

"That's a very shaky hand, Byron," remarked Hobhouse, looking at it as it lay against his arm.

Byron laughed nervously and moved away.

"Yes, my nerves don't improve of late!" said he. "I find myself wanting to fall backwards and getting horribly dizzy for nothing at all."

"That's something new, isn't it?" asked Hobhouse, looking keenly at Byron's white face.

Byron nodded and bit his lip.

"Worry, perhaps," said he.

"Byron!" Hobhouse went close to him and, taking him by both shoulders, made him stand face to face. "Have you kept your promise?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You promised me you would never take laudanum again."

"When?"

"You know well enough, my friend. Now tell me. Have you?"

Byron closed his eyes and again bit his lips.

"I tried. But it's damned useful sometimes, Hobby," said he. Hobhouse sighed and stared out of the window.

"Is it fair to yourself or Lady Byron?" he burst out, after a somewhat painful silence.

"The new life doesn't obliterate the old," said Byron, tensely. "I've found that out. Certain pictures I want to blot out here"—he pressed his hand against his forehead—

" they remain. I never thought the brain could so retain scenes. They come back so often, Hobby."

" Mary Chaworth-Musters again ? " asked Hobhouse in a low voice.

Byron nodded, then sank down and covered his face with his hands. After awhile he spoke.

" I see her so often in that room at Hastings. I told you how. It was only a second, I believe. But, my God ! how it haunts me. I want to forget."

" But she recovered."

" Yes. Only, I'm alone so much. Not as regards people, you understand ; alone here "—he touched his breast—" and memory will not fade. I don't know who is the worst off—this is between ourselves, Hobby—I to have married Isabella for esteem, to make a home, break down every link with the past, make poor Mary happy at last—she wanted this, you know—or Belle, poor soul, to have mated with a man who is utterly beyond her comprehension, outside her sympathy."

" You shouldn't say that," said Hobhouse.

" I've tried to keep up the pretence. But I won't do it to you. I felt this marriage was a mistake a week afterwards. As for the honeymoon at Seaham . . . I had wild longings to dash away abroad, go and leave no trace of my whereabouts—get free ! It goes again. I want to make Belle happy. I esteem her more than ever. But that is not love. She always seems miles away from me. I can't stand that damned Clermont, she is always slinking about the house. It is not very cheerful at times, I can tell you. Do you know, when I knelt down to be married at Seaham I felt as if I had signed my death warrant. The feeling went, of course, but it was horribly uncanny while it lasted. You were there."

" But that is months past," said Hobhouse cheerily. " You must rouse yourself, Byron. This won't do at all. Don't leave your wife so much alone. Try to get her to interest herself with your affairs and take some thought for hers."

" I wish she was not so mad on religion—of a sort—and slaves in South America. She is so bent on reform. I tell her to start nearer home ! "

" Dangerous advice ! You wouldn't like it if she did ! " laughed Hobhouse. " But, seriously, Byron, don't encourage her to seek advice and consolation from other people. Close the door on the past. That must be done ! You must also give up drinking laudanum. Come, Isabella is only a girl,

after all. Give her all you can of your genial self. Make her go out with you. Insist, if you like. I am sure everything will right itself. Yours will not be the first happy marriage that has been founded on esteem."

His manner was so inspiring that Byron caught the infection.

"You're right, Hobby. I'll make a fresh try. And I will give up this drug. There may be a little one soon," he said, with softened eyes.

"Well, there then!" said Hobhouse. "If you wanted a motive, you've got one now."

"Good old fellow!" said Byron; "you always make a hard thing seem so easy."

"By the way, Byron, you mentioned your sister. Why not get her to come here for a visit? She would be such a good companion for Lady Byron."

"Yes, I will. I had thought of it. The two got on quite famously when we stayed at Newmarket."

"Try and get your wife to consider the travel plan. Your work has stopped lately. You must not let it die out. You need inspiration. Italy would be the very place for both of you. By the way, you could live more economically there, as well."

Byron's eyes flashed with pleasure. The mention of going abroad brought the colour to his pale face. He always felt pent up in drawing-rooms, and the theatre was only a distraction for want of a better. Hobhouse knew he had touched the right note. Something in Byron's temperament responded to the beauty and softness of the Italian skies, whilst the mere thought of Greece would transform him into a happier being for days.

"If only Belle would consent," he said.

"Of course she will. Besides, as your wife it is her privilege to help you to keep that flame alive," said Hobby warmly. In his own mind he felt convinced that if these two were ever to be happy, they must be alone and far removed from the Milbanke family.

"You must insist upon Mrs. Clermont remaining behind," were his parting words. And he went on his way feeling more at his ease than he had done for some time past about Byron and his marriage.

To Isabella's surprise, Byron put in an appearance at tea. He came rather sheepishly and sat down with a most

apologetic air, talked to her genially about his affairs, and asked her to come with him that night to Drury Lane, as a special favour.

"I know you don't care for acting much, but it's a special night, my dear. The Committee are giving Kean a benefit. He is really wonderful. I am sure you would enjoy it. And I want to introduce you to Kinnaird and the rest. Lord Essex asked after you yesterday."

Isabella considered. She had been waiting for an opportunity to speak to him on financial matters. Byron always avoided them. Her mother had written urging her to find out all she could, for a particular reason. "Now that your dear uncle has left us his money and you will benefit, it is of the utmost importance that you should know how Byron stands." He seemed to be amiable to-night. The two were drifting apart, but it was easier to talk to Byron when he was in this humour. It might be wise to fall in with his suggestion. Her one fear was poverty. She dreaded it more than anything else on earth. All her rosy visions of a great position as Byron's wife were fading. She had expected to find a petting and blindly adoring husband, who would indulge every whim. She had realized that she was married to a man who needed more of her attention than she cared to give, who had whims and caprices of his own. His deeply emotional outburst of feeling about such matters as Kean's acting or the beauties of Greece left her cold. The Seaham household had been practical, methodical, regular. She expected a continuance of this life at Piccadilly. Within a few months she had developed a great sense of her own importance and rights as a wife. Byron saw nothing of this. She was, to him, still the fresh, round faced girl he had nicknamed "Pippin," a little stiff and unbending through inexperience and her strict upbringing. She needed a wider outlook on life. That was all. Unable to give her love, he had grown to reverence her, and her coldness hurt him more than he realized. So he was delighted when, to-night, she seemed to agree and actually accepted his offer to go to Drury Lane.

"Belle, dear, I'm sorry if I have neglected you at all," said he. "Hobby tells me you were rather unhappy the other day. I know I've been selfish; but I have a lot of worry on my mind lately, and I've gone out to forget it. Things will be all right soon. There's nothing for you to bother your little head about. Business, that's all. Now,

you run off and dress Here . . . kiss me ! " He suddenly took her in his arms. She pushed him away.

" Please, Byron, remember I do not care for violent embraces," she said quickly. " Do not forget I shall be the mother of your child. Kindly respect me as such."

" What a goose you are ! " said he, and laughed. " Oh, talking of goose, would you like Augusta to come here and stay awhile ? She will be good company for you."

" If you desire it," she answered, and went up to dress.

Naturally the whole conversation was detailed to Mrs. Clermont. Everything his Lordship said or did was taken good note of by the faithful soul.

" It is about time he did think of you a little," was her comment as she dressed Isabella's hair.

" I am glad to go out to-night because it will give me some opportunity of seeing how Lord Byron behaves at the theatre, if he meets actresses in the green room. I shall notice if he remains in the box or makes excuses to go behind the scenes. All this Committee work he talks of is so much nonsense. You have often said so, have you not ? and I think it is, myself. To-night or to-morrow I shall have a thorough understanding with him about business. I have fully made up my mind."

There was no reply. Mrs. Clermont had gone to the wardrobe for a wrap.

" He actually apologized to me." Isabella felt triumphant. " And he suggests that his sister, Mrs. Leigh, should come here for a visit. It would be rather good, I think."

Mrs. Clermont came to fasten her Ladyship's dress. Isabella went to the glass and looked at her own reflection.

" His Lordship is extremely fond of Mrs. Leigh," said she.

" Rather a strange sort of devotion to a woman who is only his half-sister, is it not ? " remarked Mrs. Clermont quietly.

Isabella looked at her, puzzled. The manner in which the woman had spoken suggested more than the words.

" What do you mean, Mrs. Clermont ? " she asked.

The woman sniffed and pursed up her thin lips. Then, with an evil smile, she said :

" Well, it's not my affair, of course, but if I was married now and my husband wanted to bring his half-sister under my roof, for purposes of his own, I know I should object, that's all."

There was a pause. Isabella's face changed. A look of terrible hardness came into it. Her eyes narrowed. She

stood looking at her own reflection and Clermont watched her. There was no mistake. *The seed she had planted had taken instant root.* Mrs. Clermont hated Byron as much as her Ladyship's mother did. She quickly changed the topic.

"Here is your wrap, my Lady. Shall I wait up for you?"

"Yes, please stay up," said her mistress, and she slowly swept from the room and downstairs to the sitting-room where Byron was waiting for her, looking out of the window, with his nervous fingers playing among the fringes of the curtain.

He never noticed the frozen look on her face, her aloof manner. He was full of a new idea. To talk to Belle on their return home about going abroad. Isabella was usually quiet. So, with a smile, he followed her downstairs to the hall, entered the carriage and drove off to the theatre.

When they arrived they found the house full to overflowing. The announcement of Mr. Kean's appearance in "Richard the Third" had proved a powerful attraction that night.

Byron conducted his wife to their box. Their arrival caused a little flutter in the stalls and circles. Heads peered out from boxes, handkerchiefs were waved up to them from some of Byron's more intimate friends, many of whom were eager to pay their respects to the young bride.

Lady Melbourne was sitting almost opposite. She smiled and blew a kiss to Isabella, who wished her aunt would not make so much demonstration in a public place. Byron was delighted and went round to speak to her, promising to bring Belle after the first act.

"I expect they will be starting soon," he added. The time was already past eight and the orchestra was commencing to play.

Lord Essex entered the box and greeted Byron warmly.

"Come over to my box. Lady Byron will be delighted to see you," said the latter. When he returned he found Scrope Davis and Kinnaird waiting.

Isabella went through the ceremony of introduction with each very calmly, but said very little.

"Shy, poor girl," thought Davies, as they talked together.

Kinnaird and Essex commented on the full house and the expectations for a brilliant evening.

"You will see Kean at his best," said Kinnaird to Isabella. "There is nothing like his 'Richard.' Even his 'Shylock' comes second to it. Were you here last week? No? Well, I

hope you will often favour us with your presence," he said graciously.

"What is the matter?" said Essex. "The overture is over, and they are not ringing up."

The house, that is to say the rougher element of it, was beginning to get restive. The galleries were stamping and whistling. The lights were lowered, and everyone expected to see the curtain rise. There were cries of "Hush!" from the stalls and boxes. Then one of the actors put his head through the curtain and nodded to the orchestra, who commenced to play the overture a second time. More disturbance in the gallery, and this time in the pit.

"What upon earth are they doing?" said Byron to Lord Essex, who hurried away without a word. He presently came back in a great state of consternation.

"Lord Byron, what are we to do? Kean is ill, or pretends he is, and says he won't go on. We shall have the house in a riot if he does not stir himself. It's too exasperating."

More cries for Kean. More clapping, and then hissing broke out. The people were getting angry.

"Will you go round and see what you can do with him?" cried Essex. Byron nodded and left the box.

By this time the pit and gallery were stamping, shrieking, cat-calling, and making such a stir that the overture, played for the third time, was quite drowned in the din.

"Lord Essex, what is the matter? Is Mr. Kean ill?" asked Isabella.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Ill through his own excesses, my dear lady," he replied coldly. "The truth is that Mr. Kean has more affection for brandy than for work. He has been intoxicated no less than six times this last month at the theatre. I, for one, am most heartily weary of it."

Isabella looked at him in astonishment.

"You mean to say he dares to drink when he is acting?"

"Yes. I've done my best to stop him. The whole thing is a disgrace. I shall vote that we cancel his engagement at the next Board meeting."

"Oh, yes. Of course; quite right. He should be dismissed at once," said Isabella.

Lord Essex smiled approvingly.

"I wish you could persuade Lord Byron. He is our chief difficulty. He seems to have a great partiality for Mr. Kean,

and, but for his Lordship, we should have replaced this very troublesome gentleman by a more responsible artist."

Isabella bit her lips. So Byron was a friend of this notorious man! Another proof that Mrs. Clermont's hints were correct. Unconscious of the impression he was creating in her mind, Lord Essex proceeded.

"As a matter of fact, his engagement was a mistake. He was no more than a strolling player. We should have waited for another man of Mr. Kemble's dignity and breeding. This Mr. Kean is very brilliant; no one can deny his powers. But these do not compensate for his serious drawbacks socially and morally. A very important matter for a theatre of the standing of Drury Lane."

He then detailed a good deal of the private history of the delinquent into her sympathetic ears and was highly gratified to find her duly shocked.

Meanwhile Byron was in the actor's dressing-room, standing with his hand on Kean's shoulder, trying to rouse him into some show of activity.

Half dazed with drink and shivering in every limb, dressed for the part of Richard, with his cloak lying over a chair and his sword half girded on, the unhappy artist was lying with his head on the table buried in his arms.

"Courage, Mr. Kean! Come, pull yourself together, man! You'll be all right, I know."

Byron stooped over him and touched his hand.

"You're as cold as ice. Here, have half a glass of this and make an effort. You can, you must, I say."

He crossed over, poured out half a glass of brandy, and returning lifted Kean's head and laid him back against the chair. To give him more stimulant for the moment was the only way to restore his nerve, to get some life and warmth into the poor, trembling frame.

"Not to-night," muttered Kean, handing back the glass after drinking. "It's no use, I can't. I dare not fail. Put on Rae—anybody."

"No. The house is packed. They are shouting for you, and if anyone took your place we should have a riot. It can't be done," said Byron firmly. He saw it was more a case of nerves than actual incapacity.

"Rae, he knows it," said Kean, leaning back and closing his eyes.

"I'll be damned if I allow it!" Byron rapped out. "I

refuse to help you to ruin your career, Kean. Be a man! You will give us your best to-night. I know you better than you know yourself."

The inspiration in his voice stirred the other. But Byron saw rebellion in the great dark eyes that now met his own.

"I have come round here on your account alone," he added. "Lord Essex is furious."

"Let his Lordship go to the devil!" Kean burst out, suddenly stirring himself. "That's the way with these fine ladies and gentlemen, all of them, except you, Lord Byron. They don't care about the poor mummer for his own sake, damn them! I know!"

"Why think about this to-night, Mr. Kean?" said Byron, gently. The actor struggled to his feet and stood swaying to and fro.

"Why? I'll tell you, Lord Byron. Three years ago to-night I stood beside my boy's bed. Oh, there were no fine Lords and Ladies waiting to see Kean act that night. I'd just come from playing the buffoon in a barn. There wasn't enough warmth on the bed to cover his poor little limbs and keep him from shivering. We'd eaten nothing but dry bread for days. He died in my arms from starvation." The deep voice broke. Kean dashed the tears from his eyes and blazed out fiercely, "Why didn't they bring me to London before? My God, I could have saved him . . . saved him. I played 'Richard' in those inns as well as I shall ever do here!" . . . . .

There came a knock at the door.

"Overture, third time. Is Mr. Kean coming?"

"Go to hell, the lot of you!" cried Kean. "Tell them so!"

Byron was at the door in an instant, opened it and called down the passage:

"Make ready. Mr. Kean is coming in a few seconds!"

He closed the door.

"Take your revenge," he cried. "Show them you're not beaten. Show them genius cannot be starved or killed. On you go, Kean. Play, man! Give every bit of yourself. Not for them—for your art, for the soul in you that could come through such things and live."

Byron's eyes were blazing no less than Kean's. His face was alight with such pride and belief in the power of the actor that all rebellion died out, and suddenly the little man straightened himself and caught Byron's hand.

"Steady, Kean, steady! That's better!"

"I'll do it for you, Lord Byron. For you," cried Kean, with such pathos that it brought the tears into his listener's eyes.

"No, no! Because you must! Because you cannot help it! Now where's your cloak? Come, time's pressing." He handed the garment to Kean.

"Gird on your sword. You'll fall over it," said Byron.

"Oh, my God! Why isn't my little Howard here to-night?" cried Kean longingly. The brandy had warmed him. The shivering had gone. He looked at himself in the glass.

"Perhaps he is. Who shall say?" Byron's deep voice lingered in the air. They looked at each other for a moment. The fire of intellectual power had returned to the dark, classic face. The look of pride on it showed Byron that his work was done.

"Yes, I can hold them now. I am ready," said Kean intensely.

Byron crossed to the door and opened it again. The call-boy was waiting outside.

"You can ring up," said Byron. "Tell them Mr. Kean is coming now."

He stepped back. As he did so, the actor assumed the gait of Richard and slowly limped towards the door. He looked straight ahead and appeared to be unconscious of any other presence in the room. The thin, sensitive face became grim and the lips were smiling ironically. Edmund Kean vanished and the crooked-back tyrant passed out of the room and down to the side of the stage.

Byron watched him in silent admiration. He waited for the curtain to rise. There was no stir now, in front. Another second and a veritable hurricane of applause told him that the actor was on the stage.

> "Now is the winter of our discontent
> Made glorious summer by this sun of York . . ."

He waited to hear no more, but hurried back to his box. One tragedy had commenced that night, and Byron took his place again, leaning over the edge, drinking in every word of the play, little dreaming that the curtain had rung up for another drama even more arresting, more fraught with consequences than Shakespeare's immortal play.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"THE soul of nature," thought Byron, listening in delight to the music of the actor's voice and watching his expressive gestures. Kean's Richard the Third, like his Shylock, defied all stage traditions. Here was no bombastic, ranting tyrant, but a cool, calculating creature—intellectual, subtle, arresting by his magnetic power and grim humour; inwardly gloating over the ease with which he duped his victims.

"Isn't he perfection, Belle?" whispered Byron, after Richard's scene with Lady Anne had terminated amidst a storm of applause and the second scene had begun. There was no reply. She was sitting up stiffly with her eyes fixed on the stage and neither moved nor spoke. Byron was pleased. He supposed her to be carried away with the performance and decided not to disturb her. He soon lost himself again as Kean made his reappearance. The actor had never played so finely. There was not a trace of illness or recent depression. He was completely master of himself, king of his art and the audience. The extreme delicacy and reserve of his work was interlarded with electric touches that flashed out and held his audience spellbound.

The scene with the young Princes was remarkable by reason of his facial play. The lighting up of his eyes at mention of "The Tower" revealed a fell purpose as the two children passed off to their doom. And the latent savagery of his taunt to the unhappy, maddened Queen Margaret, his triumphant glance at the crown as he refused it, and the mad outburst of triumph after his acceptance, brought the curtain down in a hurricane of applause.

"Magnificent! Magnificent!" cried Byron, rising. "Belle, I must go and congratulate him. The poor fellow has been so ill." Without waiting for her reply he hurried away.

Lady Melbourne came round to the box.

"My dearest Isabella, I am delighted to see you here to-night. Where is Byron? I have not seen him much lately. Why don't you come and see me now?"

She kissed her niece with affection and looked at her critically.

"You're very pale, dear. You should come out more. You must not shut yourself up too much."

"I suppose Byron has been complaining of that?" said Isabella.

"Not a word, not a word. Now, why not ask him to bring you back to our house after the play?"

"No, thank you, aunt, it will be far too late. I should much prefer to go straight home."

"Well, as you please, my dear. Oh, come in, Mr. Moore, and you too, Mr. Sheridan."

The two gentlemen entered the box. Lady Melbourne then realized she had made a mistake. The latter was by no means sober. However, she introduced them to Isabella, who looked very resentful at having to greet strangers.

"Lady Byron, we all owe your husband a measureless debt of gratitude. He is the only man here to-night who could have cured poor Kean's cold!" said Moore. She turned away.

"Now, Mr. Sheridan, when are you going to give us a new comedy?" laughed Lady Melbourne.

Sheridan blushed and looked rather sheepish.

"Why, what's wrong with you?" laughed Moore. "You're never at a loss for a repartee as a rule."

"Words fail me in the presence of divinity!" stuttered Sheridan, making a low bow to Isabella, which nearly landed him on the floor.

"I'm ashamed of you. Go away!" said Lady Melbourne, as she saw the look of anger on Isabella's face. "Take him away, Mr. Moore; we shall have him falling into the pit."

"Oh, the pity of it, the pity of it!" said Sheridan, in a gallant attempt to sustain his reputation. Moore laughed, but Lady Melbourne motioned them to go.

"What a man!" she said, when they were alone again. "My dear Isabella, Sheridan is the sweetest of men and one of the best. But the poor dear soul will not keep sober. I have given up trying to persuade him. You must use your good endeavours."

A shrug of the shoulders was the only answer.

"Oh, it is no use taking notice of these little things. Men are all like so many children and require as much looking after, or else they fall into mischief."

"I do not understand you, aunt," said Isabella indifferently. At this moment the orchestra made its reappearance. Byron returned just as Lady Melbourne was going back to her box. He kissed her hand.

"My dear boy," she whispered, "when are you going to bring Bella to see me?"

"As soon as she will come. This is the first time we have been out to a theatre at all." She hurried away and he took his place again. Kean's electric power intensified as the play proceeded. Withering sarcasm, rage, hatred, and growing despair marked the point where Richard finds himself isolated from his friends and confronted with his enemies. The supreme climax came in the battle scene with Richmond. Here the actor seemed to be superhuman. His wild, frenzied figure dashing about the stage, the agony of his cry for "A horse! a horse!" and the terrific combat with the victor stirred the house to a pitch of restrained excitement that commenced to break bounds during the scene, but was promptly stilled by loud cries of "Order! Silence!" from the other part of the house, intent on not missing a word or moment of the play. Byron felt his heart beating violently and the blood rushed to his face. Every nerve in him trembled in union with Kean.

The moment arrived when Richard and Richmond confront one another. One pause and then the former literally hurled himself on his foe, fighting like a madman. Beaten to his knees, anon staggering to his feet to renew the combat as though possessed of a thousand devils. Richmond struck the sword from his hand. With one magnificent gesture of defiance Richard looked at him, then extended his arms and expanded his breast to receive the blow, regarding his conqueror with calm and dreadful despair. The fatal thrust was given. He stood, smiling evilly, and suddenly dropped to the ground, dead.

In the ovation that followed Byron lost all sense of time, and cheered and applauded unsparingly, while Kean took call after call panting but obviously gratified by the results of his labours.

"Bravo! Splendid! Well done, Kean!" shouted Byron, and then turned to Isabella. She had risen from her seat and was just behind him, standing with her hands folded and her face as hard as stone.

"Belle, why don't you applaud?" he cried impetuously.

"He will return in a second. Let's give him another recall!"

"Byron, kindly take me home when you have quite finished making a complete exhibition of yourself for the pit to laugh at. And on no account, please, ever bring me to see Kean again. I have no interest in the work of a drunkard who disgraces his profession. He disgusts me," said she with profound contempt.

For a moment Byron looked at her in sheer amazement. Then he touched her arm, gingerly, with his hand. She moved away.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"Merely to satisfy myself that you are really alive. Flesh and blood. That's all," he answered drily. "For a moment I had my doubts."

He stepped aside to allow her to pass out of the box and followed her to the carriage. The journey home was completed without another word between them.

On their return to the house, Isabella ordered some coffee and went upstairs to the sitting-room. Throwing off her wrap she sat down, inwardly fuming.

"Will his Lordship require anything, my Lady?" asked the maid, placing the tray before her.

"I don't know. You had better ask him," replied Isabella.

His step sounded along the passage. Her first impulse was to rise and go upstairs. Then she reflected. After all she was quite entitled to her own opinions. Lord Essex had told her the nature of Kean's illness. Yet her husband's look of contempt had stung her. His manner on the way home had been deliberately insulting in its frigid courtesy.

He entered, told the servant to bring some brandy, and gave Belle a letter in silence. The brandy arrived, and the maid withdrawn he poured out a glass and drank it. She glanced at him with a sneer. This was why he was so fervent an admirer of Kean. An awkward silence followed. She opened her letter and read its contents.

"My mother desires to be remembered to you, Byron."

"Thank you," he replied coldly.

She bit her lip, crossed over to the sofa and sat down before the fire.

"So very glad you enjoyed the performance so much, dear," he said sarcastically. She flushed with anger. He made her feel decidedly small.

"Will you very kindly refrain from inflicting further insults on me to-night?" she answered. "I have endured enough."

Byron laughed. She rose indignantly.

"Insults? The only insult I know of to-night was offered by you to one of the greatest artists on the stage; and you owe him a very profound apology."

"Please, Byron. I have suffered too much already," said she.

"Suffered? You don't know the meaning of the word. You cannot, or you would never sit in judgment on others. You talk of suffering. When you know something of it, you may think and speak like a sensible woman, not like a damned Methodist!"

"How dare you!" she cried furiously. "I will not listen to such insolence!"

He crossed over to her.

"And how dare you," he replied sternly, "speak of a man who has struggled, starved, wept tears of blood for his art, as you spoke of Edmund Kean to-night? He poured out the best that lay in him—his very soul—and you could sit there and watch him like a block of ice. You could see the people going mad with enthusiasm at his performance, yet you never raised a hand to applaud him. And all you can say is that he disgusts you!"

There was no mistaking his anger, his scorn of her. His words were just and she knew it. But they roused the fanatic in her. All her puritanical hatred of the theatre sprang up as she answered him.

"Let the whole world go mad over Kean's acting if they choose. I refuse to pander to depravity and drunkenness. Lord Essex told me all about him while you were in his room—no doubt drinking with him, sympathizing with him, of course. I heard the story of his 'illness' quite fully."

He turned on her with such intense anger that she shrank away.

"What do you know of Kean yourself, personally?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I? Nothing, I am glad to say. But what I have heard . . ."

"Precisely," he answered bitterly. "You heard. You know nothing of the real truth. You are quite ready to believe Mr. Kean everything that is bad. You can't even

accept the evidence of your own eyes and ears. You haven't soul enough to appreciate the glory of his art."

There was a profound silence while Isabella sat tapping her foot upon the floor, and Byron drank another glass of brandy and sighed.

He then took her hands and sat down beside her.

"I'll tell you something for your own good," said he quietly. "It's time you gave up sitting at home and came out with me a little more, saw the world and tried to understand a little of its temptations, its struggles. Your people have brought you up in a glass case. You talk a precious lot about your Christianity. Try to practise it."

She wrenched her hands away.

"I will not be treated like a child by you, Byron!" She rose and walked to the table. "I am quite right in what I say. Lord Essex told me to-night that the reason Kean was afraid to appear was for fear he should fall. That he was half drunk and had been so constantly. Why, he actually has to take brandy to act at all!"

Byron threw back his head and laughed.

"How very shocking, isn't it?" said he. "Why, the 'Childe Harold' you used to profess to admire was written on gin!"

"Oh, it's very easy to see why you are Kean's champion."

"Precisely. A fellow-feeling, of course!" He got up and, crossing over to the table, poured out more brandy.

His temper had been thoroughly roused by her cruel censure of the poor actor who had come through his ordeal so bravely. From the time of Kean's advent to Drury Lane, Byron had taken the deepest interest in him, had learnt his sad history and befriended him. There was much in that wild, erratic genius that appealed to his own temperament. The two had been drawn to one another from the first.

"You may talk of him all night, if you wish," said Isabella defiantly. "I have no wish ever to think of the creature again."

Byron turned away.

"I suppose your people have brought you up like this; you can't help it," he said indifferently. "Some day you may be wiser. I hope so, for your sake. I am very glad Augusta is coming to stay with us. She is a Christian, God bless her, if ever there was one! Knows all the weakness of mankind, I think. As good as gold herself, and tolerant to others. She

is wonderful. The only person who has ever really helped me at all."

A more injudicious speech could hardly have been made at the moment, if Byron had only known. He saw his wife's face darken, though he could not guess the cause. Mrs. Clermont's hideous suggestion now returned in full force to Isabella. *She had no desire to repel it. Like all people with narrow ideas about religion, her mind became unclean by force of suggestion. She saw evil with the rapidity of lightning. She believed it willingly.* Her husband never dreamed that beneath that prim exterior lay a deep tinge of fanatical zeal that could be both cruel and callous.

"As to your sister," she replied tauntingly, "you will no doubt find her society much more entertaining than mine."

"I shall, no doubt, if this is to be your usual attitude to life in general." Then he checked himself and remembered the wise counsel of Hobhouse.

He went to her, and with one of those swift transitions from irritability to tenderness, put his arms round her.

"Come, let us kiss and make it up!" said he. "I'm a beast to tease you about Kean. I suppose you really hate the theatre. I must remember that in future; and, of course, you don't understand men at all. You have had a very sheltered life. Forgive my words. My temper slips out at times."

Isabella released herself from his embrace and moved away. He watched her with an expression of pain.

"Belle, I'm sorry, dear. Won't you believe me?" There was no reply. "Come, what's wrong now? Do try to cultivate a little warmth, my dear." He waited for her to speak. She was standing by the fire, impatiently tapping the floor with her foot.

"Come along now, be friends! I've apologized, Belle. Is there anything else?" He grew irritable again. "Oh, for the love of heaven let us have it out! What is the new grievance now? Why don't you get in a rage, fling things about, if you like. Anything but this everlasting reserve. It gets on my nerves damnably, and I've worries enough at the moment."

"Worries, no doubt, of your own making," she answered, "if you choose to spend your time in lewd pleasures, squander your money, your time, in unworthy pursuits; out at the

theatre—anywhere rather than at my side, here in your own house—what else can you expect ? "

" No help from you, Belle. I can see that plainly enough," said he savagely.

She felt her turn coming. He had lectured her about the actor ; she would let him see on which side the real injury lay.

" And if that were not enough," said she, " you are now bent on dragging me down to beggary. Bills coming in right and left, every day."

" And pray, how did you discover that interesting fact ? " he asked sharply. " I have done my utmost to keep you from having that anxiety, at least."

" I know. I heard . . ." she began. He interrupted her.

" From whom ? From your mother ? Is she trying to make mischief between us ? This accounts for your coldness. It is not only the theatre you object to, it's everyone and everything. You won't even come to Melbourne House to see your aunt, and you refuse to go out when I do ask you."

" The life you are leading does not meet with my approval," she answered stiffly.

Byron's patience had gone. All attempts at reconciliation had failed.

" Will you kindly tell me the kind of life you expected me to lead ? " he asked with withering scorn. " Did you expect me to give up all my friends, my interests, my work, and sit here droning over my wine, like your father ? Or, worse still, listen to a lot of frosty old women who come here to talk scandal with you under the guise of charity. Some of your tea parties are enough to drive me to the Cocoa Tree, I assure you. I'm weary of them. The Rev. Frank Robertson, with his lengthy talks on the liberation of slaves from their servile state of bondage ! If he wants to find slaves he can do so in England, and most of them married, Belle ! Take my word for that."

This was carrying the war into the enemy's camp with a vengeance. She was speechless with rage and walked to the door.

" Where are you going now ? " he asked mischievously ; " to bring the Family Bible ? I shouldn't, if I were you. It's a trifle late."

" Keep your blasphemy for your low associates. And

don't insult my friends—men and women of the highest morality."

"But damned dull, Belle, every one of them! They'll make you a crank like themselves. You're too young for that sort of thing."

"One is never too young to devote one's life to reform and the cause of principle."

He chuckled.

"So that's why you married me? Poor girl! You might have spared yourself the trouble. Many are the tears you will shed, that I warn you. Give it up, Belle. Good night, my dear; pleasant dreams!"

He flung himself down in a chair, obviously expecting her to go to bed. In another second she was facing him, white with anger.

"I have endured your sneers, your taunts, to-night; but one thing you shall never do. Corrupt my principles. My sense of duty is too high for you. Oh, yes! a worthless man like Kean is a hero in your eyes. Another of your wonderful friends, Mr. Sheridan, came round to our box. My aunt introduced him. How she dared, I can't imagine! He was too intoxicated to stand. That is the set you move amongst. A pretty set! And you would like to teach me to condone vice and debauchery, would you?"

Byron rose and faced her. There was a dangerous look in his eyes that should have warned her. She was heedless, and gave vent to her fury.

"So this is your plan—to lower me to your own level! Never! I would sooner die. If you choose to consort with wantons and drunkards, I do not. I am narrow, you say? I thank God I am not like the other women you admire. Caroline Lamb, your women of the theatre, your creatures of society, married most of them! They make allowances, no doubt. They are broad-minded. Naturally, for they use their marriage vows as a cover for their infamy. One thing I can tell you, Byron. These women may please you, may escape punishment in this world, but I thank God they will be punished for their sins in the next!"

He heard her words through a mist. He never saw the speaker, but instead; the picture of a pale, vacant-looking creature he had loved in every fibre of his being rose before him. He saw her again, with a hectic flush upon her wan face; once more he heard a terrible laugh of madness. With

a loud cry of anger he turned on his wife like one demented. She cowered before him as he burst out in a tempest of fury and grief.

"So this is marriage! I thank you for teaching me. This cursed bond that ties two human beings together to make their lives a hell upon earth. Get out of my sight! I loathe you and curse the day I married you! Why did you refuse me, and then change your mind? You were a fool, I tell you. The whole thing is a mockery, a sham. You should have married some man who could think as you do. Why, in God's name, did you write to me for two years?"

Isabella looked in terror at his face. It was changing from fury to despair, from despair to agony, with such rapidity that it was never the same for an instant. He suddenly turned away and sank down on the sofa.

"I wanted a little love, a little happiness, at last. But it's no use. There's a curse over me from my birth. I know it."

To her utter amazement he suddenly broke down and buried his face in his hands, bursting into a torrent of wild emotion that shook him from head to foot. The sleeplessness, the strain of many months of past sorrow and remorse, the incessant worry of his financial affairs and the laudanum had done their work. Isabella watched him curiously, but with no touch of womanly pity. She despised emotion, even in her own sex. In a man she failed to understand it.

Byron was, to her, a callous, reckless being. She never gave him credit for real feeling at all. But she was glad to see him suffer; it left her the victor. He sat there for some time without looking up, but grew calmer. What would he not have given for his sister's gentle voice, her arms round him, in these moments of utter weakness?

He looked up at last and saw his wife standing by the table, looking steadily at him.

"Ah, Belle, you talk of judgments very lightly. What do you know of men and women whose lives have been tossed by the storm, or of hearts torn with longing and remorse for what can never be undone?"

"Remorse—for what, pray?" she asked.

"For the crime of being natural. Of having hearts to break, souls to suffer with, or brains to madden and destroy."

"All this is raving. You speak as a madman yourself."

Byron looked at her with an expression of terror in his eyes,

then passed a trembling hand across his brow. He had so often dreaded madness himself. Mary had been stricken. Was he mad, too ?

All the while the clock on the shelf was ticking away the moments of destiny. This hour was to colour his life and hers, for now Isabella loathed him. His wild words had raised the growing fear and dislike into a definite form. He looked ill and spoke distractedly. She drew away from him with a shiver of disgust.

" Child," said he, gazing at her with intense pathos, " for you are nothing more in my eyes, this is a bad business for both of us, I fear. We are drifting. Yet I wanted to make you happy, Belle. I meant to."

" Happy ! " said she, and her voice was like a cold wind.

He rose and limped towards her.

" Belle, my dear, let us forget all this. Don't be afraid. Words mean so little when we can't reveal the cause of them. You have probed deep wounds to-night. And I have hurt you. Forget it. For God's sake try to forget and forgive. Before I married you I had some terrible sorrow. It maimed me. That is all. But you can cure the pain of it with a little forbearance. Don't judge. If Augusta were here, she would understand. She knows. I hope we may know each other better some day. Then you shall hear it all. Come here, Belle. I've something to tell you."

" He has a secret," she thought, and walked to the fire.

" What do you wish to say ? " she asked quietly.

" Well, you're right about the debts. Ever since our marriage every creditor I have has been hounding me to death. Newstead is still unsold."

Her eyes glistened. If he had seen her face at that moment, he would not have said the rest.

" I am doing my best to stave off trouble, but I won't pay them out of your money, my dear, and at present I can't out of my own. We may have to give up this house. It's too much. So I have been wondering if you will consent to come abroad. If you will, it will make everything easy. Here we only snarl at one another. The season plays the devil with my work. Let us go out to Italy and Greece. We can live for half the cost. I shall write again. Think it over, and let us talk over it in the morning."

" There is no need. I refuse," she cried. " Ah, I see your plan now. To get me away from my parents. To

squander my money and drag me down, to live with your mistresses and . . ."

"By God, Belle, be quiet!" he cried in a terrible voice.

"I will not," she answered. "You speak of remorse. For what? For past crimes, no doubt. For lives dragged down in the dust. Yet I care nothing for those, for any married woman who is shameless enough to link her life with you deserves all that may befall her."

Every word she uttered was a stab at Mary. They had no other meaning for him. He turned, as if to strike her.

"Get away. For God's sake, get out of the room before you say another word," he shouted now, beside himself. She flew to the door and stood watching him. He sank down again, for the agony in his heel suddenly gripped him like a vice. As he did so, the fob of his watch caught in his cuff, and he dragged it out, flung the delicate thing into the grate and, seizing the poker, smashed it to atoms. Isabella rushed out of the room and up the stairs to her own, where she locked the door and startled Mrs. Clermont by rushing over to her in terror.

"Oh, Mrs. Clermont, Lord Byron must be mad!" she cried.

"More wicked than mad. But if the latter, so much the better for you, my Lady," said the woman, with a bitter smile. "But what is the matter now?"

Isabella gasped out the events of the past hour, with a good many additions of her own. Mrs. Clermont listened.

"I cannot have his sister here now," cried her mistress.

"Yes, you can, my Lady. You must watch her. Besides, I have orders from your dear mother. We have been guarding you all this time. I have written to her constantly. I knew all along that Lord Byron was no good to you. But that Will of his, giving his sister all his money, is the trouble. If he's mad we can soon upset that!"

So while the two sat in counsel, Byron was staring into the grate as one dazed, feeling sick and faint. Fletcher waited upstairs for his Lordship. At last he ventured to descend and enter the sitting room. He had heard Lady Byron go to her room a short while ago. He went over to the still figure.

"Would your Lordship like to retire?" he ventured; then gave a start as he saw the expressionless face.

"My Lord, are you ill?" he cried in alarm.

Byron recovered himself.

"No. All right, Fletcher. Yes, you can put out the lights.

I shall come upstairs now." He rose and moved heavily to the door. Fletcher followed him.

"Begging your Lordship's pardon, but wouldn't it be as well to lock your desk before retiring to rest?"

"What upon earth for?"

"Well, my Lord," stammered Fletcher; "pardon the liberty, only I feel as how you ought to know that to-night, when you and her Ladyship was out, I went into the library and found Mrs. Clermont there, reading your letters. She had actually opened some of the drawers. I gave her my mind, so I did. I feel sure it's happened before, but she's always been too quick for me. There was no mistake to-night, for I caught her red-handed, so to speak, my Lord."

The news stirred Byron to activity.

"Thank you, Fletcher. You were quite right. Go up and fetch her down here at once. I expect she is with Lady Byron. Her Ladyship has only just retired. Kindly say that I insist on that woman coming here at once."

In a few seconds Fletcher returned, followed by the lady in question.

"Mrs. Clermont, Fletcher found you at my desk to-night, he tells me, reading my private letters. Very well. You eave this house to-morrow," said Byron sternly.

"It's a lie!" cried Clermont shrilly. "He never did!"

"You know you was there! I saw you and turned you out of the room, Mrs. Clermont," cried Fletcher boldly.

Isabella appeared in the doorway.

"And pray, what is all this commotion about now?"

"Belle, Fletcher has found this creature at my desk, reading my letters," said Byron. "She leaves this house to-morrow."

"I'm very sorry, my Lady; I had to report it, of course," said Fletcher; "and it isn't the first time by many."

Isabella waved him aside.

"I refuse to believe your man, and if anyone leaves it will be him, and not Mrs. Clermont," said she to Byron.

"Belle, this woman is a spy and traitor. Don't you see? Surely you won't defend a creature like this?"

"Mrs. Clermont is my friend. She is not on a level with the other servants in the house," answered Isabella.

"And is she, then, to be allowed to search my desk and read my letters?" cried Byron in amazement.

Isabella turned away.

"You have only Fletcher's word," she answered.

Mrs. Clermont came forward and made her a deep curtsey.

"My Lady, what will Sir Ralph and your dear mother say if I am to be sent away for nothing?"

"Tell them to go to hell!" cried Byron.

"My Lady!" said Clermont.

"Tell them," continued Byron, "that you were found dishonest and rightly discharged, and ask them to take you back, if they choose."

Mrs. Clermont darted a venomous glance at him.

"Belle," cried Byron, "this woman has been the cause of our unhappiness. You can see what she is. Send her away."

"I refuse to part with the only friend I have under this roof," answered Isabella.

"Good God, do you consort with things like that?" Byron looked in disdain at Clermont. "If you require a friend, my sister is coming."

"My Lady, Mrs. Clermont has often been prying about his Lordship's room," said Fletcher.

"A lie! Your Ladyship, he is jealous of me. All the servants try to lower me," whined Clermont.

"Leave the house to-morrow, or I'll have you turned out."

"You take your orders from me, Mrs. Clermont, and I would not part with you for any consideration. Byron, if Mrs. Clermont leaves, I shall go home at once!"

Byron watched them as if in a spell. He saw his wife lean on Mrs. Clermont's arm and walk with her to the door. He saw the woman's malignant face turned with an evil smile of triumph on him as they passed out. It made him turn cold, and through the open door a chill wind swept over him. The two disappeared up the dark stairs. Fletcher's voice sounded miles away.

"Will you come to bed, my Lord?"

Byron made no reply. He was alone in the room. The air was full of evil. It was hovering over him like a cloud. The darkness made the room invisible. It was open to the sky and he was homeless. As one in a trance he heard Fletcher ask again, "Shall I light more candles? Are you going to stay down here, my Lord?" and he slowly answered,

"No. Let us go upstairs."

"My Lord, the woman lied," said Fletcher. "I swear I found her there," and Byron moved to the door and answered dreamily:

"Yes, Fletcher, she lied. I could see it in her eyes!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The arrival of Augusta Leigh, some weeks after the upheaval, was hailed with immense relief by Byron and shared, in his usual respectful way, by Fletcher.

" His Lordship's health is in a very serious condition, Mrs. Leigh, and no one seems to know it, least of all himself," said the valet to her soon after her arrival.

Byron had begun to develop unaccountable fits of sickness and faintness of almost daily occurrence. Added to this, his wild outbursts of temper taxed Fletcher's patience and widened the breach between Isabella and her lord and master.

" If someone don't come and look after him soon, we shall have a funeral in this 'ere house," said Fletcher to himself. He also confided in Mr. Hobhouse.

" It is his business worries, I expect," said the latter.

An atmosphere of chilly dismalness pervaded the house. Now that Isabella was approaching her maternity, she lived almost entirely in her own apartments, attended by Mrs. Clermont. Any impulse that Byron felt, to break down the barrier that had arisen between his wife and himself, was thwarted by this woman. Every outburst of fury, every attack of illness was maliciously commented upon, and letters were sent constantly to Lady Milbanke. These were never entrusted to any of the servants ; Mrs. Clermont always posted them herself.

It was all very curious. Isabella appeared to take a great liking to Augusta. The latter, in the goodness of her heart, set herself the difficult task of reconciliation between two beings who were fast drifting apart. But what surprised her was to see that Isabella appeared quite indifferent to the state of Byron's health. She was, as usual, utterly absorbed in herself.

Augusta took to visiting Byron in his study as often as possible, and one day, while he lay on the sofa, prostrate from an unusually bad attack of faintness, she gently broached the subject of a doctor.

"Byron, dear," said she, "you must really have advice. These attacks are most alarming. I have never known you like this before. It worries me."

"Nonsense, Goose, I'm all right. Very worried about bills and many other things, but I don't need a doctor. He would only want to bleed me. Do me more harm than good."

Augusta shook her head at him.

"You can't deceive me," said she. "I know why you don't like doctors. They would find out about that wretched laudanum and make you give it up."

Byron frowned.

"Now, don't be cross, there's a good boy," said she kindly. "It is really very dangerous. You promised me, long ago, to stop taking it."

"I promise many things," he replied wearily.

"*Crede Byron*!" she reminded him laughingly.

"It is a pity Belle forgets the family motto. She never trusts me at all."

"Listen, Byron," said Augusta. "Poor Belle is nearing motherhood. That means a great deal to both of you. You must try to forget all past differences and look forward to the future."

Byron's eyes became tender. He had always worshipped children.

"I'm a brute ever to forget it," he said remorsefully. "If Belle gives me a son . . ."

"Or a daughter," suggested his sister.

"Yes, either, my dear. I looked forward so much to poor little Medora's birth, and she brought nothing but sorrow. All the passionate longing and love I had for her died when I saw Mary that day."

"She is better, better. Remember that alone, Byron," whispered Augusta.

Byron looked at her in sudden despair.

"Goose, it isn't doctors I want, but love and sympathy to heal that wound. God, how it aches at times! I've often longed to confide in Isabella. It isn't right for husband and wife to have secrets. They should be able to speak freely. I tell you, my dear, I've often had the words on my lips, and then some chilling remark from Belle about 'degraded women who deserve to go to hell if they forget their marriage vows,' or some sneer about my own shortcomings, and I can't speak. She has often said that I seem to have some secret on my

mind. I have told her I had and it was too heavy a burden. She hints at remorse for my own iniquities, and then, as often as not, goes out of the room. For a woman so young she is the most silent and severe person I have ever met. Yet I respect her purity. I feel that time will remedy all our troubles. At least I did until our quarrel."

Then Byron sat up and told Augusta the whole story. He never spared himself. If there was one characteristic he possessed above all others, it was a complete honesty about his own failings.

"Goose, it was more than half my own fault. I could have said all my fault, but I can't forgive that damned Clermont; and Isabella treats her, not as a servant, but as an equal."

"That is very wrong indeed," answered Augusta. "I must speak to her about it. You are sure Fletcher was not mistaken?"

"Have you ever known Fletcher make a mistake of that kind, or tell a lie?"

"No, he is the soul of truth."

To sit here quietly talking to Augusta brought back memories of Newstead, and Byron took her hands impulsively.

"My dear, why did we ever marry? We were made for bachelors and spinsters; then you could have come to the Abbey and kept house for me."

Augusta's eyes grew moist. To her Byron was just the same school-boy who had written to her in all his troubles. She had been his sole anchor in those days. No love so pure as a sister's, none so unselfish.

Just now the two were thinking of the dear old Abbey. It was one of the great links between them. This love for ancient homes is one of the signs of a great race. The Byrons had a magnificent history: a fact too often forgotten by him in his moods of despondency. Yet, what a heritage! Men of his line had fought in many battles, from the Siege of Calais, the battle of Crécy. They had helped to put Richmond on the throne of England, had served in the Civil War, and given six sons to the cause of Charles the First.

There was good fighting blood in Byron and a great pride in his race. There was courage and unswerving honesty, that found expression in his work as it had done, formerly, in the swords of his ancestors.

Augusta shared all this courage and pride with him, and

they both possessed a splendid sense of humour. This, in itself, was utterly beyond the comprehension of Isabella.

The house had heard some laughter lately, and Byron had been a little more his bright self in spite of illness; and had his wife been blest with that divine gift, Mrs. Clermont's deadly influence might have lost its power.

How little brother and sister realized that their own happiness, when they could throw off care and be cheerful, was being noted down by Mrs. Clermont and detailed to Isabella with a terrible significance.

"My Lady, she actually puts her arm round his neck. I saw her do it. And there they are, in the study again to-day, talking and laughing as if there were no bills to think of, as if you were nobody," said she.

To-day Augusta suddenly felt an impulse to urge Byron to confide the secret of his past hopeless love for Mary to his young wife. Isabella was nearing her ordeal. She might have a woman's feelings for the tragedy.

"Byron, dear, I do think that if Isabella knew how you have suffered in the past she would understand you much better. You see, as long as this barrier exists, it makes you unlike yourself at times. There is no need to speak of Medora, of course. You need not tell Mary's name. But she has learnt a lot about your other affairs, about Caroline Lamb and Lady Frances Webster. They were not likely to give her any real sympathy for you, but Mary's story would touch any good woman's heart. It was a boyhood love. She knows that you must have had some such experience. Could you trust her now?"

"You are right, my dear," said Byron, after a long pause. "If poor Belle and I could really come together once, I feel all would be well. It comforts me to talk to you about it. She has many splendid virtues. I believe her, in spite of her primness, to be the soul of truth. She seems very fond of you. And, after all, I must not forget she is young. I think she could be an amiable and bright nature if she could free herself from the guidance of Clermont. I am sure her mother is hostile to me. When the baby is born I must ask her to reconsider coming abroad. I want to make her happy, Goose, I do really," he concluded.

"Now, this is my own good boy!" said Augusta tenderly. "You will do what I ask? Promise me to see a doctor and have advice about yourself. Get rid of this illness! It

makes you bad tempered. No wonder you and Belle can't come together more. You're such a cross old bear sometimes, and I know why. Now, promise me to reform ! "

Byron's eyes were wet with tears.

" Goose ! I believe you could make a man do anything, you seem to understand so well," said he.

" My dear, when a woman who has a husband with a weakness for gambling, and a brother with a weakness for all sorts of things, and several children to bring up, perhaps it makes her sensible. I have no time to worry about little things, and certainly no time to spend in analysing myself as Belle does. I shall try to check her tendency to read such narrow-minded authors. Do you know, Byron, at times I think she might even have religious mania if she was not careful. That is her danger. She is so full of theory and book lore, and knows nothing whatever of the world of real people. Oh, yes, you're both a couple of children, in different ways ! "

They talked of Isabella, lovingly. Wondered how she was feeling, and if she would come through her ordeal without much suffering.

" I hope so. I would not wish any woman to suffer as . . ." she laid her finger on his lips, and shook her head. It was not always good for him to remember Hastings, and he had been very ill that day.

" Would you like to go up and sit with her awhile ? " he asked.

" Not just yet. I believe she is having a consultation with the doctor. He arrived not long ago. I'll stay here with you. She is really better advised to come down and join us. There is no need for her to remain upstairs, as if she was already laid up."

" Poor little soul ! I expect she feels nervous," said Byron.

But there was no trace of emotion on Isabella's face as she sat in her boudoir before an elderly gentleman, who looked extremely perplexed and anxious. Mr. Le Mann had listened attentively to a reading from a lengthy document which she had read to him. She now laid it on the table, folded her hands, and waited for his reply.

He scratched his chin, polished his glasses, adjusted them, and looked at her in complete amazement.

" My dear Lady Byron, you astonish me ! I am sure you are quite mistaken. Lord Byron may be out of spirits,

irritable, and even violently bad tempered, but then, all men of his nature and exceptional genius would be difficult to live with at times. You ask me, on behalf of your parents, Sir Ralph and Lady Milbanke, as well as yourself, to give you a certificate to the effect that Lord Byron is hopelessly insane and unfit to have the management of his own affairs, and this without his knowledge, without my even making a strict examination of his case. It is unheard of!"

He warmed to the subject, and concluded his remarks with considerable heat.

"There is no need for any examination," replied Isabella. "Who should know Lord Byron better than his own wife? My parents agree that his conduct is impossible. I have given you a list of reasons, which I am willing to certify correct."

"Possibly you imagine them so. But I must warn you, Lady Byron, that the procedure you suppose so easy is fraught with many complications," said the Doctor sternly.

Isabella's face hardened.

"In consulting you, Doctor, I rely upon your professional aid and complete secrecy concerning the facts I must lay before you."

The Doctor bent his head in acquiescence.

"Very well, then. My uncle, Lord Wentworth, has just died. He has made me his heiress. That is to say, the money goes first to my mother, and will afterwards revert to me. Lord Byron will, in that case, control part of it."

"What then, madam?" said the Doctor bluntly. "Is this an affair of money? If so, I refuse to have any more to do with the matter."

"No! No!" Isabella became pathetic. "Can't you realize that Byron is hopelessly mad? I have witnesses to prove it. He is bringing me to ruin, even now. Think of my future! I must fight for that and my unborn child."

His face softened a little.

"You are, like all young mothers, burdened with fears, and this strange hostility towards your husband is another symptom, not unusual in such cases as yours. It will pass," said he firmly.

Isabella clasped her hands appealingly.

"He has killed my love for him. Destroyed every vestige of it!"

"And what of his for you?"

" Doctor . . ."

" Lord Byron cares for you very much," said Le Mann. " He never speaks of you but with the utmost gentleness and kindness. I have had many little talks with him. I assure you that from what I have already seen, he has the very deepest respect and honourable affection for you. You are doing him a terrible wrong by this attitude."

" Oh, I suppose you have been talking with his friend, Mr. John Hobhouse ? " Her manner was icy.

" No, but I warn you that if what you believe is true, I shall certainly consult him on the subject of Lord Byron's health."

" I have spoken to you in confidence, you dare not betray me ! " she cried, in agitation. " This Mr. Hobhouse is not to be trusted ; he and Byron are old college friends. Hobhouse would do anything on earth for him. He, like all Byron's friends, is no more to be trusted than the rest. A cynic and man of the coarse world would scarcely blame his friend for any vices."

She was losing ground, and she saw it. The Doctor tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair, and looked bored.

" Doctor, if I can give you proof . . ." she urged.

" And witnesses," he warned her.

" Yes, my dear friend, Mrs. Clermont, who has been with me here for some time now, and has seen everything," said Isabella, with a great emphasis on the last word.

" I must have an opportunity of making a medical examination of Lord Byron myself," answered the Doctor. " I will then be able to judge. I see you appear to have been studying some medical book there. Let me advise you, my dear young lady, to leave that sort of thing alone. The lay mind can hardly grapple with the intricacies of medical studies and not make serious mistakes."

" I have told you of his violent tempers. Does a man hurl his own watch into the grate, and smash it, if he is sane ? "

The Doctor rose with a smile of pitying tolerance.

" We men do many strange things at times. Judged by your methods, my dear Lady Byron, half society would, at this moment, be in the madhouse ! "

A tap at the door. Isabella went to it. Augusta was waiting.

" Oh, Belle, I have persuaded Byron to see Doctor Le

Mann ; do ask him to go down to the study when you have finished your own consultation."

The Doctor heard her.

" Thank you, my dear, I will," answered Isabella, and closed the door again.

" That lady is his Lordship's half-sister," said she. " She has not long arrived here. Have you seen her ? "

" Only in passing upstairs," answered Le Mann.

" She has a strange influence over him, and not a good one," said Isabella bitterly. " Encourages him in all his vices and gives in to every whim. Well, she has good reason, for he has made her his heiress. She managed the matter very cleverly."

She looked at him to see the effect of this announcement ; to her indignation, the Doctor merely took up his hat, and held out his hand.

" Good day, Lady Byron ! " he said coldly. " I will let you know the result of my examination ; but I am perfectly sure that Lord Byron is as sane as I am."

With that he left her to go down to the study.

The next morning she received his report. It ran thus :

" Dear Lady Byron, I have great pleasure in informing you that your fears regarding Lord Byron's health are entirely unfounded. His Lordship is suffering from a rather serious attack of jaundice. He has arranged to undergo a course of special treatment. This complaint would account for all the symptoms you notice. May I beg you to remember that he will require very great attention and sympathetic care until he is better ? In Lord Byron's case, with his nervous nature, that is of very great importance. He has promised to cease taking the drug, which, of course, is largely responsible for his present condition, and reacts on him seriously. I shall give that every attention, and have no doubt that he will soon be quite himself again.

Yours very truly, L. Le Mann."

She replied :

" I neither accept your report nor am I satisfied, and I intend to consult another opinion."

But for some days she reappeared at meals, and was warmly welcomed by Byron and Augusta. Mindful of his sister's advice the former watched his opportunity and, one morning, after Augusta had left the room, he said to his wife :

" Belle, my dear, you have often told me you thought I had some secret on my mind, something I was keeping from you."

He paused, and looked at her wistfully.

Isabella replied calmly.

" Your manner led me to think so, Byron."

Her tone was cold and formal. In Augusta's presence, she was quite amiable of late, and affected great sisterly love for her ; but she still maintained a great reserve to him.

Byron rose, and went to her, putting his arms around her.

" My dear," he said impetuously, " forgive me all our worries. I have many things troubling me now. Debts ! Well, you know that ; but I shall discharge them easily. There is something else I want to tell you."

He did not hear the door open, or notice Mrs. Clermont had glided into the room, and was standing, at some distance, listening.

" Well, Byron ? What is it ? " asked Isabella, responding to his embrace with evident reluctance.

Byron hesitated.

" First of all, I have heard that poor Mary Chaworth. . . . You have heard of her, Belle ? . . . is very unhappy in her wedded life. It troubles me sometimes I was in love with her as a boy. Naturally I feel for her."

" Do you ? " answered his wife. He saw her eyes grow narrow, and a look of bitterness cross her face.

" Yes, of course," said Byron lamely. " Wouldn't you be unhappy, for instance, if you were to hear that Lord Eden, the man you were nearly engaged to once, had made an unlucky marriage ? "

" I have entirely forgotten him. I do not understand. What is your secret ? Is it connected with this woman ? " Then a thought struck her ! " Does Augusta know it ? " she asked eagerly.

Byron raised his head, and looked round. His face darkened as he saw Mrs. Clermont. The ordeal of trying to confide had been too much for his impaired nerves. He grew confused.

" No ! No ! Nothing ! For the love of God, don't ask Augusta ! " he cried in deep agitation, and breaking from her, left the room.

Isabella looked at the woman in amazement.

" What upon earth does he mean ? " said she.

Clermont's face was very evil, as she said quietly :

" Have you forgotten what I told you the other day ? This

confirms it. Watch them both, closely. There is a secret, and it is clearly connected with Mrs. Leigh. Otherwise, why should you not ask her? Whatever it is, it may be very useful. Oh, I saw him trying to get round you, my Lady, but don't be deceived. Remember what your dear mother wrote to you. If we can get that certificate to prove he's mad, I think Mrs. Leigh may find that precious Will illegal, after all!"

"Doctor Le Mann will not move," said Isabella, with an angry gesture.

"There are others, and other ways," answered the woman, and they went upstairs together.

That night Augusta was called into Belle's room and told that Byron was mad. In spite of her protestations, the two women sat on each side of her, and argued the matter.

"Belle, you are wrong. I will never believe it," said Augusta tearfully. "He has been taking the drug, and he has jaundice, but it is nothing more."

"Of course, Mrs. Leigh, you would never wish to believe it," said Mrs. Clermont, with hidden meaning in every word.

Augusta rose, and taking no notice of the woman, said, "Good night, Belle," and left the room. She was disgusted that a servant should be permitted to sit in council.

When the door closed, Isabella turned on the woman angrily.

"You are a fool, Clermont! Hold your tongue! Do you want her to guess? Kindly keep a still tongue in your head. Now that I cannot get the certificate, we must find other ways. But try to remember that she looks on you as a servant."

"Oh, his Lordship and Mrs. Leigh have always taken care to make their opinions clear on that point. They would be very glad to send me away," said the creature. "Of course, if you can really do better without me, I can return to Kirkby Mallory. I've no doubt your mother will find me of great service."

Isabella relented.

"No! No! What should I do without you? Only do be more prudent. If it is possible to get Lord Byron down to my home when I go for a visit there, there will be no more trouble about certificates. My mother can be relied upon to arrange everything, and once there, we should of course have full control. I hope Le Mann will not go to Hobhouse. That would wreck everything. Now, be very civil to Mrs. Leigh.

She can influence his Lordship. She must not be allowed to think that I suspect her. Be more guarded ; that is all."

Then she sat down to read over a letter she had received from Lady Milbanke that morning. It ran:

" Take care of Augusta Leigh, for if I am any judge of human nature, she hates you bitterly. She will be, like a wounded animal, dangerous."

To which Isabella replied, dutifully,—

" Dearest Mama, I always treat her with the utmost affection, and I am sure she is quite in my power. She thinks she can bring Byron and me together. All goes very well now."

And so she left the situation, until two months later, when Augusta Ada Byron was born.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Among the earliest callers at No. 13, Piccadilly Terrace, to offer his congratulations on the birth of the new arrival, was John Cam Hobhouse.

Fletcher admitted him, and whispered that her Ladyship and Miss Ada were doing well. Then he led the way to Byron's study. Hobhouse had not waited long before Byron and Augusta entered together, in the best of spirits, and after a brief talk, Byron hurried off again to the nursery.

"Well, and how are things going now, Mrs. Leigh?" asked Hobhouse.

"Much better. As I hoped, the coming of the little one will bring Byron and Isabella together," said she, smiling.

"That's good! I am glad to hear you say so," answered Hobhouse.

"Isabella has been very charming to Byron to-day. But I do wish she would dismiss Mrs. Clermont. I can't bear that woman."

"I agree with you."

"The pity is that he could not persuade her to do so, and I believe they had many quarrels over it. Byron is so glad that she is more amiable now that he won't worry her on the the subject."

"Well, perhaps he is wise."

Augusta looked round, and came nearer.

"Mr Hobhouse, just before Belle's illness she gave me a shock. She told me she believed Byron to be mad."

Hobhouse smiled.

"Poor Byron! Yes, he would give that impression to anyone who did not know him, when he's in one of his best tempers. I take no notice of them. He's a genius, and that explains it."

"You see, I cannot tell her that the real cause of Byron's weakness is the remembrance of . . . Hastings."

"No! No! Of course not. How is Mrs. Musters now?"

"She will never be quite herself. Byron is always haunted

with remorse on her account. He imagines that the birth of Medora drove her insane. But that is not everything, I know. It was the dreadful treatment she endured from her husband that is the real cause. It weakened her mind."

"All the same, Mrs. Leigh, I have a strong feeling that Byron and she should never have been reunited. I fear there will be always some disaster hanging over him while he still remembers her."

Augusta gazed out of the window sadly.

"Yes, the curse of Annesley," said she.

"He must forget her," said Hobhouse firmly. "How can he be happy with Lady Byron if he will constantly look back?"

"Byron cannot forget like others," said Augusta. "Why, he remembers every detail of his unhappy childhood, he can repeat lessons he memorized at school, he can remember almost every word of verses he has written. His brain is too active. He retains impressions for years, and this is a lasting love."

"Rather say it was," answered Hobhouse.

"Why, what are we talking of?" said Augusta, with a smile. "We are forgetting Belle and the little daughter."

"I always find it difficult to remember that Byron is really married," said Hobhouse.

They then discussed her Ladyship and Miss Augusta Ada dutifully, rather surprised at themselves for having thought of those early years. Yet the same thought was in the minds of each. Byron's love for Mary Chaworth was fast wrecking his second chance of happiness. The shadow of Annesley hung over Piccadilly in some inscrutable manner.

Presently Byron returned.

"Now then, Hobby, how are you?" said he. "Excuse me for dashing off in that way, only I've been having quite a long interview with my daughter."

They all laughed at this.

"By the way, had any breakfast yet?" asked Byron.

Hobhouse looked at him in great surprise.

"Do I usually breakfast at eleven o'clock? You may, if you like, but I rose hours ago!"

"Hark at virtue!" said Byron to Augusta.

"And haven't you reformed your bad ways yet?" asked his friend.

"Oh, yes. Since Goose came to town I have developed quite an appetite, and actually had a real dinner last night."

"Amazing! Now, may I pay my respects to Lady Byron and the Daughter, or is it too soon?"

"They are both asleep," said Byron, with immense satisfaction.

"Capital! Capital!" replied Hobhouse, looking attentively at Byron's pale face. His illness had left its marks, but there was a great improvement in general brightness. He was rather nervous and excited just now, possibly owing to that tremendous talk with Miss Byron.

"Anyway, he's up, and not lying about in his dressing-gown," thought Hobhouse, "that's better."

Augusta left them together, and went upstairs to the invalid.

"I'm truly sorry to hear that Newstead is still on your hands, Byron," said Hobhouse sympathetically. "Of course, I am more grieved than I can say, to know that you must part with it."

"Everything I have ever cared for has gone out of my life at some time."

He was suddenly despondent and sighed heavily. Then smiled.

"That's too bad of me, to-day of all days," said he.

"I'm sure you don't mean it now!" Hobhouse put his hand on Byron's shoulder.

"No!" answered Byron, with a flash of his old fire "The sooner Newstead goes, the sooner I shall get some peace. Look at those," he pointed to some papers.

"I see," said Hobhouse.

"I've never had such a time of it for years. The papers, damn them, have been very busy giving me a huge fortune. I only wish it was true!"

"How did that piece of information become public property?" asked his friend quietly.

"How should I know?"

Hobhouse was silent. He was pretty sure that this was Lady Milbanke's doing. He did not like to speak, knowing how Byron disliked the lady.

"How are you feeling lately?" said he, by way of changing the subject.

"Better, really better. Le Mann has done me a great deal

of good. Of course, he's bent on trying to make me live a good life, and give up everything."

"Meaning, of course, laudanum and brandy?"

Byron flashed a resentful look at him.

"I've had quite enough lectures from Augusta about that, and I don't want another from you to-day, Hobby," said he.

"All right, I won't give one then!" answered Hobhouse, wishing to keep him in a good temper.

"Jaundice is the devil," Byron went on, nervously. "It makes one long to throw things about, and hate the sight of everyone. I've been amazed at myself for the things I've said, at times."

"Not to Lady Byron, I hope."

"I am afraid so, yes."

"Well, that must end now, for everyone's sake."

"It shall. When Augusta is here I feel a different man. I hate being ill. It's ignominious. Life seems to begin and end with one's digestion."

"Anyway, I should take the doctor's advice to the letter," said Hobhouse significantly.

"Oh, you would, would you?"

"Now, Byron, there's no reason to adopt that tone. What good is the wretched drug to your brain or any man's, for that matter?"

Byron was silent for some time. He lay back in his chair looking into space. His fingers played with the arms.

"I suppose you have never known what it is to have to force yourself to forget something that will come back, again and again, something that takes possession of the brain and tramples down all the bright thoughts and new hopes?"

"I have not been so unfortunate, but I do understand," said Hobhouse gently.

"I thought, when I put Mary out of my life, and married Belle, that one life would begin where the other ended."

"It didn't, eh?"

"No, Hobby, it didn't. That's all. Oh, God! I wish it had."

"Have you spoken to Lady Byron about going abroad?"

"There's no chance of it, yet. I asked her, and she absolutely refused." He became depressed again.

"What a pity," said Hobhouse.

"Yes, I wanted to go so much."

Hobhouse pointed to the bills.

" But these cannot go on," said he.

" No, we must see about Newstead as quickly as possible," replied Byron. They fell to discussing business matters, and, to his friend's surprise, Byron went through the intricacies of the sale of his estate with wonderful patience.

Meanwhile, Isabella was propped up in bed talking to her sister-in-law. She looked very placid and content. Augusta sat beside her, talking happily of future plans.

" Now, Belle. You are not to worry any more about the bills, and dear Byron is ever so much better now."

Isabella looked at her with a curious smile.

" I wish I could think so. But Dr. Bailie's report has quite confirmed my fears," said she.

Mrs. Clermont, who was hovering round the cradle, turned and came to them.

" Mrs. Leigh, it is no use your shutting your eyes to the danger. His Lordship is most unreliable. He still sleeps with loaded pistols in his room, and in her Ladyship's present state of health we must take every reasonable precaution."

" Her Ladyship is going away, and he will join her at Kirkby Mallory."

" Augusta, my dear, I only wish you to promise me that you will not leave the house until Byron has come to me," said Isabella ; " that you will stay with him, and send me daily reports of his health."

" From day to day," added Mrs. Clermont.

Augusta looked at her with a flash of her brother's hot temper.

" Mrs. Clermont, there is no need for you to put ideas into her Ladyship's head. I shall consult Mr. Hobhouse about Byron's health. I am quite sure he is well. I will not allow you, Belle, to be constantly deceived about the matter as you have been. Byron has always kept his pistols in his room. That is nothing. If there is any reason to consult a specialist, I will ask Mr. Hobhouse's advice. He has known Byron for years."

Isabella lay back and closed her eyes.

" There ! you are tiring her Ladyship," said Clermont.

Augusta drew herself up.

" If Lady Byron is worried to death by you, with these idle notions concerning her husband's health, her progress is likely to be retarded, and I shall certainly seek advice myself."

" Augusta ! " Isabella opened her eyes. " Pray, do not

be angry with Mrs. Clermont. She thinks only of me. All I ask is that you will stay with Byron when I go."

"Of course, as long as you wish."

"Thank you, my dear! What I owe to your sisterly care of me, I shall never forget as long as I live!"

There was a tap at the door. Byron came in.

"Has Mr. Hobhouse gone?" asked his sister. "If not, I should like to speak to him."

"He has gone. But he is coming in to-morrow, dear."

Isabella stirred.

"Augusta, don't go. I want you here," said she.

Byron crossed over to the bed.

"Well, how are we now?" said he, smiling down at her. "You look splendid. Where is Ada? Bring her to me."

"You must not disturb her now. She is just closing her eyes," crooned Mrs. Clermont.

Byron gave her one look, and frowned like thunder.

Augusta saw it, and went over to the cradle.

"It's all right, dear. She is wide awake. Come and look at her," said she.

"In a moment!" Byron sat on the bed, and took his wife's hand.

"Now, my dear, everything is going well. Hobby thinks we shall soon clear up all our difficulties. He has gone to see Hanson now, and when you are able to go to your people I shall set to work and straighten up all the bills, and join you as soon as I can."

"Thank you, Byron. I am very glad."

"All the same, Belle, I fear we must let this place go. Do you mind very much?"

"Where do you propose to live, then?" asked Isabella.

"Could you not stay at Newmarket with me, until you can decide?" suggested Augusta.

There was a cough from Mrs. Clermont, who was now engaged in tucking the baby into her cot.

"No! No!" said Isabella, quickly. "My mother and father have asked me to stay there. Byron will be welcomed at Kirby."

"There is no need to discuss that yet," he said. "You must get quite strong first."

Augusta noticed that Mrs. Clermont was now by the fire, and that she was steadily watching Byron in the mirror that hung over the mantelpiece. He gazed at Belle tenderly. The

coming of his child had brought a great wave of feeling for the mother. He was conscious of a deep reverence for her now, and a desire to live in complete union with her, to wipe away all past misunderstandings.

"Belle, dear," he whispered. "I am so sorry we had so many quarrels. They were only little ones, and my fault. I see that now. But the truth was, I was ill. I was not as careful as I should be. I feel quite well now, and we shall soon get the bills out of the way. Hobhouse and I have gone through them to-day."

"You said so just now, Byron. How you repeat yourself!"

"Do I? Another of my bad habits!" he laughed.

"Quite a habit. A very peculiar one," she answered.

Augusta looked at her quickly. She did not like the tone.

"Never mind about that now!" he said. "We can't reform all at once, you know." He bent over and kissed her.

"Please, Byron. I am very tired," she remonstrated.

"If Belle is tired you will have to be turned out," said Augusta. "So take a good look at Augusta Ada. My dear, it was sweet of you to name her after me!"

"That was Byron's wish," said Isabella.

"And yours also, I hope?"

"I did not oppose it, of course."

Byron was looking down at the baby.

"My eyes, Belle, my eyes!" he cried. Then, seeing Mrs. Clermont near, he flashed out, "Is there any need for you to stand there watching me?"

She gave an angry glance at him, and moved away.

Left alone, Byron hastily turned back the cover and, as quickly replaced it. His eyes were full of tears.

"Thank God, my darling, your little feet are straight," he whispered with a sob. Augusta's quick ears heard it. Belle seemed to have fallen asleep, so she went over to him.

"Now, now . . . what is this?" said she. He caught her hand.

"Come down with me!" he whispered huskily.

One swift glance of understanding passed between them. They remembered another cot, another bed, and the sound of waves breaking on the shore outside. She realized that his nerves were overstrung. His face had become white and drawn. There was a look in his eyes that warned her of danger. She knew he was now making a brave fight to conquer

the craving for laudanum, and as he smiled at her tearfully, she gave him a loving look.

" Let us go down and sit together, my dear," said she.

" It's all right. It will be easier soon. Only come with me for awhile."

The strain he suffered at that moment can only be understood by those who have known a blinding sorrow and drugged it to sleep, or else by one with true sympathy and loving pity for the faults and weaknesses of temperament.

" He must forget her," Hobhouse had said a short while ago.

" If he could only have done that years ago, poor Mary and he would have been happier now," thought Augusta.

All this while a pair of snakelike eyes were watching the two in the mirror. Mrs. Clermont saw the tears, the touch of hands; and her face had the look of a devil.

" Belle is asleep now. Come, dear ! " said Augusta, and the two left the room together.

" There ! Did you see that, my Lady ? " Mrs. Clermont closed the door and locked it.

Belle opened her eyes.

" What were they doing ? " she asked.

" He was crying over her. You never saw such a look. Oh, it's easy to see how matters are going on there ! Standing together, hand in hand, like a pair of lovers, for all the world ; and you lying within an inch of them, on your sick bed."

" Yes, of course, you are right," replied her mistress.

" Then, why, my Lady, ask that woman to stay in the house with him when you have gone home ? "

Isabella smiled coldly.

" You forget. We must not let her suspect that we know. I am warned by my mother to keep friends with her until we have arranged about Lord Byron, if he comes to Kirkby Mallory."

" But if he does not ? "

A knock at the door. Mrs. Clermont answered it. A servant was waiting with a letter.

" Another from your mother," said Clermont, handing it to her mistress.

" Lady Milbanke writes that she has changed her plan," said she, after reading it. " It will not be practical to get Lord Byron down to Kirkby. The doctor's second certificate is now withdrawn. Dr. Bailie will not give his word about the insanity. It would be therefore useless."

" But what is your Ladyship going to do ? "

" I shall go, as arranged. And then I shall consult my mother," said Isabella calmly.

At that moment Augusta Ada awoke, and cried lustily.

* * * * * *

Two weeks later, the house was in a state of flutter and excitement. Boxes stood piled up in the hall. Mrs. Clermont moved hither and thither. Servants were commandeered from all parts of the house to assist in the preparations. Her Ladyship was going away on a visit to the country.

Such fussing and peeping at the baby ! Such curtseying and compliments to Lady Byron ! Such eulogies over her wonderful courage ! " And she so young, too ! " said the women to one another, in ecstasies of emotion. Fletcher found his hands full. Everything had to be arranged so that the coach could start at noon. But at the last moment one of the horses went lame ; another had to be brought round and harnessed. Things were forgotten, and had to be sent for. Boxes unpacked and repacked, to put the said things in. The usual excitement incidental to a lady travelling. One might have thought she was going abroad, rather than to her own country home a short distance away.

The most composed person was the heroine herself. She sat in the library talking to Byron, while Augusta nursed the infant. Never had Isabella been so kind and gracious. Byron's face beamed with happiness and content.

For the first time in many months Isabella seemed to think of him, and spoke to him so affectionately, that her sister-in-law hugged and kissed Ada.

" It's your doing, you little angel ! " she thought.

Motherhood had worked the promised miracle. Belle and Byron were happy at last.

Never had Isabella so charmed and delighted Byron as she did on this day of parting. She rallied him playfully on his return to health, told him not to worry about the bills, and kissed him several times.

" Now don't delay coming down to Kirkby Mallory soon, very soon," she pleaded. " I shall count the hours till I see you again, Byron. And, Augusta dear, you must come down and see us till we get our new house."

Her usually placid face was alight with colour and happiness. There was no trace of her former coldness or reserve.

Byron glanced at the baby and then at his sister meaningly. She nodded, smiling.

" Belle, my darling. I am so sorry for all past troubles. They were my fault, dear ! It's all right now between us, isn't it, for ever ? " he asked pathetically.

She nodded, and he tightened his hold on her, drew her to his breast and kissed her, vowing henceforth to guard himself from any word or thought that should hurt her.

" It's my own fault ; I haven't been fair to her," he thought. " Belle is so young, so fresh and innocent of the world and its sorrows."

" I really don't know how to go," said Isabella. " I feel I want you both to come with me. Augusta, my dear sister, you have been an angel of goodness, hasn't she, Byron ? "

" She is always that," was Byron's reply.

" I have only one thought, to see you two dear people happy ; and now all this trouble about the bills is going to be settled, and you are both well, I can go back to Newmarket content," said Augusta simply.

Isabella released herself from Byron's clasp, and went over to her.

" Mrs. Clermont, take Miss Ada, will you, I want to talk to Mrs. Leigh," she said. The woman stepped forward, and held out her hands for the baby.

" No, give her to me ; I want to hold her," said Byron, and the ladies laughed as he received his daughter from Augusta, and hugged her to him closely. Mrs. Clermont retired to the back of the room.

" You see, there is nothing wrong with Byron now," whispered his sister ; " but I will send you reports every day. He has given up that stupid drug, I think. Oh, Belle, are you happy now ? "

" Yes, and quite satisfied," said Isabella quietly." Remember, Augusta, I always bless you for coming and helping us. But for you we should not have come together again as we have done."

" It was only the waiting for the little one. I was sure you would be quite yourself when that was over," answered her sister-in-law. " It is always a trying time for us. And I fear Byron did not behave as well as he ought."

A knock at the door reminded them that the carriage was waiting.

Byron heard the others talking as in a dream. They

seemed far away. He felt strong and happy, and a great emotion rushed over him as he kissed Ada, and played with her little hands. She smiled up at him and crowed happily.

"We must go now, dear, the carriage is waiting." His wife's voice roused him. Mrs. Clermont stepped forward demurely to take the child.

For an instant, Byron had an impulse still to hold the child, and even as he relinquished her, his hands went out to follow her. It passed. Then he went down with Augusta, and watched the carriage drive away.

* * * * * *

A welcome quiet settled down on the house. An atmosphere of content. Byron was greatly cheered during the next few days, first by the visit of Hobhouse, who came to report favourably on the progress of the Newstead sale. Secondly, by two loving letters from Belle.

"How prettily she writes," he said to Augusta, "I am sure there is far more warmth in her than she will ever allow to appear."

"The barriers are broken down for good now," said his sister, and they sat talking of past times and building up fresh hopes for the future.

About a fortnight after Belle had gone, they were again in the study. Byron was starting for Kirkby Mallory next day, and his sister was returning to Newmarket.

Full of happiness, she watched him as he gazed into the fire. He looked more boyish now than he had done for some time. He looked up, and smiled at her.

"What are you thinking of, Byron?" she asked him.

"Of many things. Above others, how foolish it is to try and force one's fate."

She knew he was referring to Mary.

"Yes, you are right," she said. "I think the best way to steer for happiness is to let it come. We can never plan for ourselves."

"We only realize that too late," he answered.

"Come, we have done with past troubles," she said. He laughed, and threw back his head.

"Most of mine, Goose, are owing to one thing—lack of will. It's most extraordinary. Everyone thinks me strong, even

violent, and the one thing I never have used for my own good is my will power. You're the best guide I've had."

"Then it's a good thing that Belle is not too emotional; she will keep her head for both of you," answered Augusta.

"Not a bit of it," he replied. "I can be ruled by those I am fond of. Why, she could do anything with me in this new mood of hers. Coldness sends me mad."

Just then Fletcher entered with a letter.

"From Belle, I expect," said Byron brightly. The door closed, and Augusta rose, and went over to adjust some flowers that seemed in danger of falling out of a vase.

There was a strange silence in the room. She looked round. Byron had risen, and was standing as if rooted to the spot, staring before him, with a letter in his hand. His face had frozen into a mask. It was terrible in its tragic rigidity.

Augusta rushed to him.

"Byron, what is it? Oh, what has happened?"

"I don't know." The words fell slowly from him.

"Is Belle ill? Oh, don't say that little Ada has been taken ill, Byron. What is it?"

Her own voice had sunk to a breathless whisper.

"I don't know," he repeated, in the same tone.

Augusta touched the hand that held the letter. It was stone cold.

"Oh, for God's sake, do tell me, Byron," she wailed. "What is the matter?"

Then his lips moved convulsively. She gently drew the letter from his hand.

"I may read this?" He bowed his head.

The letter was in a hand somewhat like Belle's, but smaller. It came from Mivat's Hotel, London.

Augusta could hardly believe her eyes, when she read as follows:

"To Lord Byron,—

"Sir,—

"In view of your conduct towards my daughter, your cruelty to her whilst she was under your roof, and the fact that you turned her away from it. . . ."

She broke off with an exclamation, and re-read the last line again:

"Turned her away from it?" She looked at Byron.

"Go on! Go on!" he cried hoarsely.

" I have decided, and she has agreed that it will be quite impossible for her ever to return to you, and she has decided to leave you for ever. . . ."

" Give it to me, Augusta ! " Byron snatched the paper from her.

" For ever. . . . For ever," he repeated. His hand dropped to his side, and he continued to speak brokenly, as the tears rushed to his eyes, and his throat seemed to choke him—

" Augusta ! You saw her here that day. . . . She put her arms around me. . . . She kissed me good-bye, so lovingly. . . . ' I shall count the days till you come to join me,' her own words . . . her own words . . . we had made up everything. . . . Belle wouldn't lie . . . she wouldn't do such a thing as this . . . she . . . Oh, my God ! "

With a stifled moan he sank down on the sofa and, burying his face in his hands, burst into tears.

Augusta bent over him, her own eyes streaming.

" Don't, dear, don't ! " she whispered.

At that moment the door was opened, and Hobhouse stood on the threshold. His cheery voice rang through the room.

" Mrs. Leigh, this is an unexpected pleasure. . . ." But the words died away on his lips as she drew back, and putting her fingers to her lips, pointed to the figure on the sofa. He shut the door, and hurried across to her.

" What has happened ? Is Byron ill ? "

" Mr. Hobhouse ! We are in terrible trouble ! Help us, if you can ; read this." She stooped down, and picked up the letter which had fallen from the nerveless hand.

Then she bent over Byron, and whispered to him.

" Don't, dear ! Don't ! Mr. Hobhouse is here ; he will help us."

An exclamation of amazement broke from Hobhouse as he perused the paper.

" But this is absurd. . . . Preposterous. . . . Someone is playing a practical joke on you, Byron. I don't believe a word of it ! "

" You see who signed the letter, Mr. Hobhouse," said Augusta.

" Yes, Sir Ralph Milbanke," answered Hobhouse. Then he crossed to the sofa, and sat down beside his friend.

" My dear Byron ! Come ! Look up. There must be some mistake. You and your wife parted the best of friends. You told me so."

Byron raised his head with a groan.

" So far as I knew, yes."

Then a strong protecting arm raised him, and a pair of fine tender eyes looked into his own.

" Cheer up, man, we'll soon put this right ! There's some misunderstanding here, that's all ! "

Byron shook his head despairingly.

" Come along ! This is not like you," continued Hobhouse with suspicious cheerfulness. " You must not give way to dejection. I will not credit it ! Never would Lady Byron be guilty of such rank treachery. Why, to go away in all affection, taking your little daughter Ada ! . . ."

At the mention of his child, Byron rose to his feet as if galvanized into action.

" By God ! She shan't do it ! She shan't ! " he cried fiercely.

His sister rushed forward, startled by his fury.

" Byron ! Byron ! " she cried, in terror.

He was beside himself with rage.

" She says ' for ever . . . for ever ' . . ." he vociferated. Hobhouse stepped forward, and raised his hand in protest.

" No, Byron ! Her father says it. That is a very different matter. This is some trouble with your wife's parents."

" Right ! " cried Byron. " Then it is with them we deal. Come with me, Hobby, now, to Kirkby Mallory. I'll force the truth out of them. I'll raise the house over their heads, and refuse to go until I see Belle and make her return. They shan't keep her from me. By God ! How dare they come between man and wife in this fashion ? Yes, Kirkby Mallory, and the sooner the better. Fletcher ! "

He had limped to the door, and was about to fling it open when Hobhouse followed him, and caught his arm.

" No, Byron ! Kirkby Mallory for me, by all means, but not for you ! Leave me to deal with this. You must not come ! "

Byron turned on him in a fury.

" Why not ? In God's name, Hobby, why not ? "

The other forcibly led him back to the centre of the room.

" Sit down, Byron," he said firmly. He could see that the stress of emotion was causing Byron agony in his foot. " Come, sit down. Surely you can trust me to help you ? "

Byron suddenly relaxed, and almost dropped on the couch. Then Hobhouse sat down beside him, and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"That's right! Now, my dear Byron, we must act with care. We have to meet some cunning here. And if you went down, you could not deal with these people calmly. You know that you dislike Lady Milbanke, and she is no friend to you. In your present natural distress they would take every advantage of it, and you might spoil your own case. Not only your happiness but that of your wife is at stake. She must be under their influence. She is too young to think out such a plan as this. Basely desert you after tricking you into believing that she really loved you! We must not even think it of her. But for these others, they shall be brought to book. Leave me to deal with this."

"As you like, Hobby," answered Byron listlessly. He dropped back against the sofa, and spoke faintly.

"I will go down at once to Kirkby Mallory, and try to induce Lady Byron to return with me."

"Mr. Hobhouse! Is there any reason why Belle and Ada should not come down to Newmarket, and stay with me while Byron arranges his affairs here?" said Augusta eagerly.

"A splendid plan! Quite the best way," said Hobhouse, smiling at her. I see one thing. We must get her away from her relations at all costs. That is the real trouble. I am sure of it."

Anxious to prevent any further desire on Byron's part to take the law into his own hands at the moment, John Cam Hobhouse shook hands with Augusta, patted his friend encouragingly on the shoulder, and hurried away.

Augusta went back to Byron, who was lying now with his eyes closed, looking as if he was going to faint.

"My dear, your hand is so cold," she said as she touched it.

"Give me some brandy, Goose, and ring for Fletcher," he whispered.

She rang the bell and, then, going to the table, poured out a glass of the spirit, and brought it to him. He drank it off, and seemed to revive a little. A knock at the door—Fletcher entered.

"Yes, my Lord?"

There was no reply from Byron. Augusta motioned him to come closer. As he did so, the valet gave a start of surprise at the sight of the drawn white face.

"Byron, my dear, you wanted Fletcher," prompted Augusta.

He opened his eyes and stared round.

" Did I ? . . . Oh, yes ! Fletcher, if anyone calls and asks for . . . Lady Byron . . ."

" Yes, my Lord ? "

" Tell her. . . . No, I mean tell them she has gone away . . . away . . . to the country. . . You don't know how long."

" Yes, my Lord."

As Fletcher turned away, Byron spoke again.

" Fletcher, what would you say . . . if I told you—she, Lady Byron . . . had left me for ever ? "

The words seemed forced out of him.

" My Lord ! " cried the valet.

Byron tried to smile faintly.

" That's a shock . . . even to you, isn't it ? What would you say if it was true ? "

Fletcher clenched his fists, and blurted out :

" What would I say, my Lord ? I would say this. . . . If my Lady has done such a cruel thing . . . which I can't believe of her. . . . But if she has, it's that wretched Clermont's doings. . . ."

" Mrs. Clermont ! " exclaimed Augusta.

" Go on, Fletcher," said his master grimly.

" Oh, my Lord, I knew months ago she was up to no good. I've caught her creeping round doors to listen, night after night, and warned her off your desk till I was tired of it. She's a human toad, that woman ! But the night as your Lordship gave it her for touching your letters, frightened her a while. She stopped it. I thought for good."

Fletcher paused and looked frightened.

" My Lord, what a blind fool I've been ! " he cried.

" What do you mean ? "

The valet turned, and pointed now to the desk, and spoke with a quiver in his voice :

" Why, the very day afore Lady Byron went away she was there again ; I found her taking some papers out of a drawer."

" Why didn't you stop her, and come to me ? " cried Byron in a voice of thunder.

" I gave it her hot, my Lord, and what do you think she said ? Why, that she was there by your orders ! That you had asked Lady Byron to take charge of the bills."

Byron rose, gripping the couch.

" It's an infernal lie, Fletcher ! "

" My Lord, how could I know ? You and my Lady had

gone out together, and seemed, pardon the liberty, such good friends. I thought it must be all right. I didn't want to cause trouble for nothing. How could I know ? "

" Which drawer ? Do you remember ? "

The man pointed to the top one, and cast a look at Augusta, who watched Byron wrench a key from his pocket, and limp towards the desk. There was a breathless silence as he opened the drawer

Then a cry of anger rang through the room.

" You're right, Fletcher, the drawer's been forced. I have the key. . . . Augusta, look ! They've been taken ; my letters have been stolen. . . . My letters. . . ."

" What has she taken, Byron ? "

" Everything that matters to me, everything ! " cried Byron despairingly. " Letters from Caroline Lamb I was going to return to Lady Melbourne. Letters . . ." his voice dropped to a whisper, " from Mary. . . . All I had from her before my marriage . . . stolen by that devil . . . that fiend . . . and Belle ! "

His voice died away, and he stood still, then trembled very violently, and suddenly swayed, just as Fletcher sprang forward and helped to place him in a chair. Augusta bent over him in terror.

" Fletcher, the doctor, quickly . . . his Lordship's ill."

But the fit of faintness passed quickly, and he opened his eyes, and looked around as if in a trance. Augusta felt his hand lying cold in her own.

" Oh, my dear. . . . My dear. . . ."

Byron sat gazing into space, and then threw out his other hand as if to ward off some approaching presence.

" Oh, my God ! What's closing in on me ? What is it ? " he cried in a voice scarcely human in its terror. It vibrated like the night wind, and died away with a wail.

Augusta fell on her knees beside him.

" Byron ! Byron ! "

He put out his hand then, and touched her. She looked up, and threw her arms around him.

" There's no one here but me, dear. I'm here. Oh, cling close to me ! There's no one else ! "

He repeated the words slowly.

" No one else ! "

" My dear, what was it ? " she gasped.

He answered her in a queer, breathless voice.

" I can't tell you . . . it was so strange. A cold wind swept over me. . . . It was like that once before ! The night that viper led Belle upstairs. You were not here then. Then something came towards me. . . . Some force like the dark shadows. . . . Closing in on me."

" Oh, my dear, don't ! Don't ! You frighten me," she sobbed.

He relaxed under her grasp, and smiled faintly.

" So sorry, dear ! Did I do that ? It's all right now."

His voice became very pathetic.

" Only don't leave me alone, will you ? . . . Stay with me, Augusta ! You won't go away, will you ? . . ."

He broke off, and she gathered him to her like a child. He was her boy Byron, who had turned to her in the old days, and she had listened to his grief about Mary. She was, in this house, mother as well as sister to him, and in his loneliness she poured out the tenderness of her own gentle soul. How long she knelt beside his chair she never knew. But when Fletcher returned with the doctor, she rose to her feet, cramped and cold. Byron had relapsed now into a sort of stupor, and the two men carried him upstairs to his own room.

" His Lordship has received a terrible shock. He must have absolute rest. This blow coming on the top of his recent illness has prostrated him," was Mr. Le Mann's verdict.

Augusta and Fletcher watched beside the bed until the early hours of the morning.

" His Lordship is a little better now. Do go and rest," begged Fletcher of Augusta. " He mustn't see you looking like that. I'll stay with him until you come back. Do try to sleep yourself, Mrs. Leigh ! "

She rose from her vigil, nodded, and went slowly out of the room, and along the passage. Her heart was beating, and she felt sick and cold.

" Oh God, what does it mean ? . . . " she whispered to herself. " What fate is hanging over our unhappy race ? "

For on this morning, fifty years ago, she remembered that William Byron had groped his way out into the snow-clad streets—an outlaw, to live, from then until his death, forsaken and alone."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

At an early hour, three days later, the inmates of Kirkby Mallory were surprised by a call from Mr. Hobhouse.

"Will you kindly tell Lady Byron that I desire to speak with her at once?" said he.

"Lady Byron will see no one, sir. She is indisposed," answered the servant. "Please come this way and I will tell Mrs. Clermont you are here."

"I do not desire to see or speak with that woman. I did not journey here from London to talk to a servant. I am here to speak with Lady Byron or Lady Milbanke."

The servant left the room without another word. Hobhouse looked round. The room was dark and dismal. Outside the rain was falling.

The clock ticked loudly. No one came, but he heard steps overhead and voices talking in an agitated manner.

He sat down and drew out the letter Byron had received, reading it over with his brows knitted, deep in thought. It was very brief, signed by Sir Ralph Milbanke, and merely stated that Lady Byron had been driven from her husband's house and in consideration of the terrible treatment she had received, had fully determined never to return to Byron again. The details of a separation to be arranged without delay.

"What is behind this?" thought Hobhouse, as the door opened and Lady Milbanke entered. He rose and bowed, distantly she inclined her head and motioned him to be seated.

"I understand that you desire to see Sir Ralph. He is in London on very important business," said she.

"My principal reason for coming is to speak to Lady Byron," he answered stiffly. She raised her eyebrows.

"Impossible. Quite impossible. My daughter is very seriously ill."

"May I beg to be informed of the nature of her malady?"

"You may," she replied. "Her distress of mind owing to her husband's unspeakable cruelties."

Hobhouse rose and advanced to the table.

"Kindly state, in explicit terms, what you mean, Madam."

"Is there any need?" she answered. "I presume Lord Byron received my husband's letter."

Hobhouse drew out the paper.

"Lord Byron received a most incomprehensible letter from Sir Ralph, and I am here to demand an explanation of that now.

Lady Milbanke rose and faced him.

"Understand, once for all, that we refuse to give any reasons."

"Indeed?" said he ironically.

"And furthermore," she added, "I decline to proceed with this interview."

She moved to the door, but Hobhouse intercepted her.

"Do not think, Madam, that you can evade the responsibility of this affair," said he. "Lady Byron has most unjustifiably left her husband. Either she or you or both have already spread the most injurious rumours against my friend, in society and even in the papers. Unless Lady Byron sees her husband and gives him the explanation to which he is fully entitled, there will be legal proceedings to compel her to return."

"To return to a house that is already in the hands of bailiffs, to return to a man who is practically a beggar?"

"So!" cried Hobhouse in a ringing voice. "You have now shown your real motives. This contemptible piece of treachery is a question of money! I thought so. I have had my suspicion for a long time that Lady Byron was being influenced by her family against Lord Byron. I am sure of it now. So his wife has left him because he is in financial difficulties, and her family aid and abet her by inventing trumpery excuses to cover the act, which every right-minded person will justly condemn."

There was to be no further pretence of a formal interview, of any courtesy between the two. It was war to the knife. He faced her with withering scorn and Lady Milbanke shrank back, biting her lips in fury.

"I warn you now, Lady Milbanke, that Lord Byron has fully decided to contest this matter," proceeded Hobhouse. "He will file a petition without delay for her Ladyship's return. She will then be forced to appear and explain why she left her husband, with every outward show of affection

and goodwill, and then permitted her father to write such a letter as this, three days afterwards."

"That is easily explained," she sneered. "My daughter had very grave reasons to fear Lord Byron was mad, and for her own safety she maintained a show of friendliness while under his roof. Had he really been mad she was quite ready to receive him here and devote herself to the alleviation of his affliction. Indeed, we were all prepared to do this."

"You mean that if Lord Byron had been mad Lady Byron would have still lived with him as his wife?" asked Hobhouse in utter amazement.

"Yes. So you see, Mr. Hobhouse, our share in the matter is quite clear." Lady Milbanke looked at him with a smile. He was silent.

"Don't you think that we had better leave matters as they are?" she said glibly.

"Permit me to fully understand your meaning," said he, at last with a complete change of manner which puzzled her. "You tell me that Lady Byron thought her husband mad. *Yet in spite of that she was actually ready to go on living with him as man and wife.*"

"Certainly."

"You fully understand"—Hobhouse was ominously calm—"*that she would have faced the possibility of having more children by Lord Byron?*"

"I cannot discuss this. It is too gross."

"I ask you, again, to prove your words, Lady Milbanke. She was fully prepared to live with Lord Byron as his wife?"

"Yes. And so far from any conspiracy . . . why, we would have taken complete charge of Lord Byron and relieved him from all business worries of any kind. Sir Ralph was preparing to do that when my daughter returned."

Hobhouse suddenly turned on her, his eyes blazing with anger.

"Now you have betrayed yourself, and look to it well! Very convenient to prove Lord Byron mad and take possession of his affairs, his money! Oh yes, I have no doubt that Sir Ralph was quite ready. His own financial state is too well known."

"How dare you!" she gasped, white with rage.

"Why, the whole thing is as clear as daylight," he cried. "Now, Lady Milbanke, I give you a week to arrange with Lady Byron as to when she will see her husband and return

to him. Or, in any case, see him and state why she has left him. Withdraw all charges against him, and leave it to his discretion regarding a separation. I, for one, would never advise him to wish her to return, unless she does so in a proper spirit. But otherwise there shall be no hiding the truth from the world. Once his petition is filed, she will be compelled to appear. This matter will be made public. I also tell you that the doctors she consulted with regard to Lord Byron's state of mind will be called as witnesses, and the true facts fully exposed. How Lady Byron and her family tried to prove Lord Byron insane, in order to get control of his financial affairs!"

"You would never dare, nor would he!" she cried.

"Lord Byron has nothing to hide," he replied.

"Would he were dead!" hissed Lady Milbanke. "Such a man is not fit to live!"

"Every word you say proves your hostility, your motives. Go on, pray. This is most interesting," said he quietly.

With a great effort she controlled her fury.

"You have said things to-day that I shall never forget," she said sullenly; "no, nor forgive."

"The happiness of Lord Byron and his young wife are at stake, and to prevent treachery I am prepared to say much more, and in the open court," said he.

Without another word he left the house.

Lady Milbanke dashed upstairs into Isabella's bedroom. Her daughter was lying down, fully dressed.

"You will have to go back and make the best of it," cried her mother furiously. "That man Hobhouse has been here. They are going to fight it tooth and nail!"

"I will never go back," Isabella replied.

"What else? We can't afford to be dragged into court. Hobhouse knows too much. Oh, you have nicely blundered, you and Clermont. It appears they have the doctors on their side. We should be ruined if Byron forces you to appear."

Mrs. Clermont hurried over.

"Your Ladyship . . ."

"Hold your tongue, Clermont. Now, you can make up your mind, Isabella, what you will do. I refuse to have any share in the matter if trouble comes of it."

"My Lady, what are you doing?" cried Clermont as Isabella rose from the couch and walked over to the dressing-table.

Isabella put her aside.

"I will never go back to beggary—never," she said to her mother. "Mrs. Clermont, prepare my things. I am going to London at once without delay."

"What for?"

"I cannot tell you yet. I must consult Dr. Lushington."

"Oh, as you please," answered her mother scornfully. "I leave the rest to you now. Only our name must be kept out of the affair at all costs, you understand. Please yourself about returning. That is your business, not ours."

With that she left the room.

"Order the carriage after lunch. I shall go up to London to-day," said Isabella, and prepared to change her dress for travelling.

Mrs. Clermont helped her.

"What are you going to do, my Lady? You will surely never return?"

"No," the word was rapped out.

"But if the case comes into court?"

"I am going to make that impossible," answered Isabella.

"How, my Lady?"

"In the only way possible. I must see Dr. Lushington."

"Be careful what you say!"

"I presume you believe what you told me at Piccadilly, about Lord Byron and Mrs. Leigh?"

The two looked at one another. Clermont was confused.

"Of course, it's quite likely," said she after a pause.

"You must be prepared to swear it is true," said her mistress sternly. "Remember, I should never have thought of it if you had not put the idea into my head."

Clermont went florid and then very white.

"You said yourself you thought I was right."

Isabella bit her lips.

"It is best that Dr. Lushington should know it, anyway. We must be careful that my mother does not know the reason of my visit. She would be more angry than ever if we made an error this time."

"But you heard what she said? If the case comes into court she advises you to go back to Lord Byron and after all that has been written and said against him."

"There is only one way to prevent that. I must fight for myself. My mother is thinking of her own position. I will never go back to Byron and risk poverty."

" Oh, there is no doubt of that. He is knee-deep in bills and would only want you to live abroad."

" Never—I will not be poor : it was not for that I married him. Dr. Lushington will help me, I feel sure. Remember, no one but you and I must know of this. It is our chance."

" If anything happens to Lord Byron," said Clermont, " of course Mrs. Leigh gets all his money. The will must stand if you can't prove him mad."

" *Very little good that may do her when I have done what I intend to do now !* " answered Isabella bitterly.

On the following Saturday, Sir Stephen Lushington was seated in his study, when a servant entered, bringing him a card. He glanced at it, laid aside his pen and rose.

" Is Lady Byron alone ? "

" Yes, Sir Stephen."

" Please show her in at once and see that we are not disturbed."

The man retired. Lushington wheeled a large arm-chair to the desk as the door opened to admit Isabella. He greeted her with great cordiality, looking with sympathy at the poor young lady whose domestic troubles had already become too well known. His manner was genial and firm. He generally contrived to impress those who sought his counsel with the feeling that he or she was his especial care ; that he was bringing the experience of a lifetime to bear on their problems. He was really an excellent gentleman, with very little knowledge of character and a profound belief in his own judgment.

" My dear Lady Byron, it is most fortunate you come now, as I have an appointment in an hour and you would have missed me. I quite expected you yesterday."

" I have not been well," she replied, sighing heavily.

" Naturally. I am very sorry."

He looked down on her and mentally noted her calm bearing.

" What fortitude ! No emotion, no tears. How brave for one so young ! " he thought. He had a horror of scenes.

" I have heard from Lady Milbanke that Lord Byron refuses to consent to a private separation ; that he insists on citing you to return. Of course, you have all your evidence. Colonel Doyle has all your particulars. I fear he is not very impressed with your chance of a complete victory, but we must hope for the best."

Isabella looked up with a scared expression.

"Does Colonel Doyle think that my husband can compel me to return?"

Dr. Lushington smiled tolerantly.

"We must hope for the best," he repeated.

"I will never go back—never!" she cried.

"Now, my dear young lady," said he, sitting down beside her. "I understand your position. It is most sad. You have been very unhappy with Lord Byron?"

"Very, indeed."

"Yes, but the point is that so many young brides might want to run away from their husbands after a few months, if they are inexperienced, and . . . pardon me . . . a little impatient."

"Dr. Lushington!"

"You have not been married a year," he reminded her.

"Long enough to suffer terribly!" she answered.

"Unfortunately, your case is such a weak one that I fear you are really very ill-advised to proceed," he said, suddenly abrupt in his tone. "Doyle and myself have gone into the matter. You left Lord Byron under such very peculiar circumstances. Apparently good friends."

"Surely my mother explained?" Isabella was surprised.

Lushington looked at her quickly.

"That explanation of hers could never be brought into court. It was most unfortunate that you consulted a doctor regarding your husband's sanity. We have been notified by your husband's solicitor that this fact is one of their principal clauses against your case. Colonel Doyle agrees with me that your having done so places your advisers in a very unfortunate position."

Her colour heightened, and she tapped her foot on the floor.

"Altogether, I am not sorry to have this opportunity of a private talk with you, my dear young lady. Lady Milbanke tells us that at all costs your father and herself must not be brought into any public case. That ties our hands. Your list of grievances would not weigh with a judge. They are personal and, pardon me, from a legal standpoint very slight. Not supported by any proof. *And as to the letters that your woman, Mrs. Clermont, apparently obtained, unauthorized, from his Lordship's desk, well . . . makes it impossible to bring her forward as a witness. The opposing counsel would simply brand her as a thief.*"

Isabella gasped.

" Plain facts must be faced," said he firmly. " I cannot buoy you up with false hopes."

" But what do you advise me to do ? "

" Do you wish to avoid very serious trouble ? " he asked.

" Of course."

" Then try to prevent any more publicity about your affairs and come to some amicable arrangement with Lord Byron. He is disposed to be most generous, and I believe he must care for you, since he is so anxious for your return.'

Isabella rose and paced the room in agitation.

" You see, unless there is some very serious reason, some strong cause you can give us to aid you in refusing . . ." he extended his hands appealingly.

" Dr. Lushington, if there was such a cause," she asked slowly, " something unknown, even to my mother, that makes my return utterly impossible . . ." she paused and looked at him.

He returned the glance searchingly.

" I will keep your confidence," he said briefly. " But I beg of you to have no secrets kept from your legal advisers."

She sank down in the chair again.

" Promise me never to repeat what I am going to say."

He was silent.

" If you do not, I cannot speak. I must not," she cried.

" Lady Byron, we must always consider the possibility of legal action in such cases as these, but I will do my utmost to keep your secret, if possible. It shall only be used on your behalf. Come, come, speak freely."

For one moment she shrank back. His simple and direct way of going to the point terrified her. It was one thing to discuss this with Clermont. Dr. Lushington was another matter. The vileness in her own mind would not force itself from her lips at first. With a supreme effort, she made herself speak.

" His sister lives in the house . . ."

" Yes, go on."

" Oh ! it is all so terrible ! "

" Pray speak out. What do you mean ? "

" Spare me further. Can't you guess ? " she faltered and hid her face in her hands.

She felt a kindly hand on her shoulder.

" Tell me everything," said he gently. Then it became

easy. She need not look at him and the hideous lie came freely, until she found herself speaking as glibly as if she was speaking of ordinary matters of the day.

His sister . . . she had lived with them. Byron had always seemed so fond of her. She had loved her, too, had never understood. Until one day. Oh, would Dr. Lushington spare her? But now she knew the two were lovers. There was no doubt of it. *And so, every little word and look of Byron's and Augusta's were related with additions and base suggestions, accompanied by the shuddering modesty of the speaker.*

"Even when I lay ill and my child was born, they stood there embracing each other. Byron had no thought for me, for my agony these past months."

Her wild longing to believe Mrs. Leigh innocent and good, her prayers for both of them, impressed Lushington as touching in the extreme.

"I understand," said he. "No, you can never return. Of course, this alters everything. I must see Doyle."

"Oh, it must never come into court. It would kill me!" he wailed.

"I hardly think Lord Byron will dare to press his case."

"He must never know what I have said."

"He will have to know we have some very grave evidence against him, but of course we shall speak very guardedly."

Isabella rose to her feet, shivering. The worst was over and she could look at him now with a smile.

"You are truly a heroine. Truly noble," he said to her. "Now you have, I presume, broken off all connection with Mrs. Leigh?"

"How could I? I dared not speak."

"But you have surely not written to her since you left?"

"What else could I do?"

"You must henceforward be guided by us," he answered, "and not allow the goodness of your nature to prompt you. I truly honour you for your thought for Augusta Leigh, your desire to spare her. But you have your own interest now to guard. Nothing else must run counter to that."

"I loved her so."

"She is unworthy of your affection."

"We cannot regulate our love."

"It is a terrible affair altogether," said Lushington, "and the sooner the matter is settled privately the better for all

parties. Of course you will never breathe it to any one except your own people?"

"My mother knows nothing."

"You have been nobly silent," he answered. "Well, you may be assured of your freedom. Good-day, God bless you, my dear."

Isabella departed, well satisfied.

"What a woman! Noble, loving, truly a martyr," he said to himself when he returned to his study. "A strange case, almost unbelievable. If it were ever known it would be a *cause célèbre*. But the most marvellous thing is that it inspires one's belief in human nature with a new reverence. Her silence is almost sublime!"

From the hour of her interview with Lushington, Isabella aged. The dry-rot in her soul had commenced and her life was to be one living lie. *There was no withdrawal possible. She had now committed herself definitely.* It had been a horrible moment of suspense when she sat there with her face hidden and stammered out the thing she felt to be false. She had never really believed it. Now she must do so, in order to keep up the falsehood. She dared not think otherwise, and a new haunting fear possessed her. She pictured herself face to face with Byron. Being forced to repeat it. She hated him for having compelled her to this. If he had agreed to the separation at once there would have been no need.

She hated Augusta. Why had she come into her life? She dreaded publicity now, night and day. She could never face being exposed.

But outwardly she kept up a good show. She could at least whisper this thing to others, not in plain words, but in hints. It became her one solace. It needed so little, for the women of her set lived on scandal. It was their food and drink. They were not shocked. They loved it. Chief among these was a Mrs. George Villiers, who had been Augusta's greatest friend. Isabella took care that she should know the unmentionable causes of her distress, and the woman became virtuously zealous on Isabella's behalf. So before long an undercurrent of excitement ran through society. The women whispered to their husbands. The men stared and shrugged their shoulders. And the serpent of slander raised its head and hissed moral poison into the minds of well-meaning people who became infected before they realized.

Hobhouse could not escape hearing and seeing some of this. He consulted Mr. Hanson, the lawyer, one day. The old gentleman had known Byron since he was a child and took more than a merely legal interest in him.

"Mr. Hobhouse," said he, "we are faced with great difficulty. "Lady Byron's advisers now hint at terrible enormities against his Lordship."

"Lies, lies . . . whatever they are!" cried Hobhouse.

"Of course. And how is his Lordship?"

Hobhouse hesitated and shook his head.

"Very ill indeed," said he. "This has been a crushing blow to him, on top of other troubles. He keeps his room and looks so terrible that I never go to the house without dreading to hear that he has ended his life."

"Really? How dreadful. I had no idea . . ."

"His despair is shocking. The truth is this. He is . . . I'm sorry to say it. . . . He is drinking very heavily just now. But no one must know it. Let the world think he is acting for himself. Any weakness would only give his enemies fresh incentive to attack him."

"Is he alone?"

"No. Thank goodness his sister is with him."

"By the way, it's very curious that Lady Byron still writes to Mrs. Leigh in a friendly manner, isn't it?"

"Very," said Hobhouse.

Hanson glanced away and then said in an altered voice: "Do you know, I heard the question raised the other day as to the propriety of Mrs. Leigh remaining with Lord Byron now that her Ladyship is absent."

"By whom, Mr. Hanson?" asked Hobhouse sharply.

"By Lord Holland," answered the lawyer.

"And I had the same question put to me by Scrope Davies when I went to the Cocoa Tree the other evening. This is very strange," said Hobhouse rising. He walked over to the window, where he stood looking down on the busy street below.

"These are strange times indeed, if a gentleman's sister may not stay beside him in such a calamity as has befallen Lord Byron," remarked Hanson, putting his papers on one side.

There was no reply.

"Mr. Hobhouse, we shall have to draft some answer to the letter we received from Lushington and Doyle. They are now adopting a very threatening air."

"Sheer bravado on their part to prevent us fighting the

case and exposing the Milbankes," answered Hobhouse turning.

"Then you agree that his Lordship must fight it out?"

"What other course is open to him?" queried Hobhouse.

"Truly, no other. We must be prepared, however, for a very strict investigation into his Lordship's past life."

A startled expression came into the other's face.

"I presume, Mr. Hobhouse, in strict confidence, there is nothing beyond the usual follies of a single man that could in any way prejudice a judge and jury against Lord Byron?"

He was surprised by Hobhouse crossing and sitting down at the table in obvious agitation.

"Mr. Hanson, would every private affair, every past thing connected with his Lordship, be dragged into the light of day if this case goes through?"

"Yes. But what of that? We have both known Lord Byron for many years. I from his boyhood. He has been wild, certainly, but no more so than any young man of the day. Indeed, save for his eccentric predilection for exaggerating his own follies, few would hesitate to place him considerably higher in the moral scale than many we know and would not speak of here."

"I am not thinking of comparisons," said Hobhouse slowly.

"But, of course, the other side will do all they can to blacken his Lordship's character and will no doubt occupy their time by making the most searching inquiries into his past life, hoping to discover some secret they may use to his disadvantage."

"Good God!" Hobhouse sprang to his feet.

The lawyer rose and looked anxiously at him.

"Mr. Hanson," said Hobhouse rapidly, "there is nothing of a disgraceful nature in Lord Byron's past. I assure you that. *But unhappily there is a secret he would rather die than have revealed in such a manner.* An old love affair that ended most tragically just before his marriage."

"You do not allude to Lady Caroline Lamb?"

"No. You surely remember Lord Byron's love for Mary Chaworth?"

"A boy's infatuation," answered Hanson. "Oh, yes. His mother came to me to persuade him to go back to Harrow school. It happened years ago. He had fallen in love with her and was quite inconsolable. I often thought it a pity they never married. The Chaworths are a great family. So

highly respected, known far and wide, and the lady herself a model of virtue and beauty."

"Precisely. Now you will see why the case must not come into court!" said Hobhouse.

Hanson looked at him.

"I see. Yes, I understand completely," said he.

Hobhouse then briefly detailed the story of Hastings.

"A disaster. A tragedy to Lord Byron, now more than ever," said Hanson. "If he is to be compelled by threats from Lady Byron into some position of yielding, and rumours, terrible rumours, now floating round the town."

"Mr. Hanson, the position is even more serious than you realize. I came from his house to-day and have seen his sister. Poor soul, she is beside herself. Byron is drinking and drugging himself into a wreck. She has received bad news from Annesley. The separation case is now fully bruited in the papers. It appears that Mrs. Musters read of it and is again demented with grief and terror. She dreads this affair leading to some exposure for her. The doctor there sent a letter begging and imploring Augusta to persuade Byron not to allow these reports unless he wished the poor lady's reason to be imperilled again. If any of this unhappy business filtered through to the papers I believe he would kill himself. He has suffered the tortures of remorse so long on Mrs. Musters' account. He thought that their reunion was his fault and that he had driven her mad. His own hope has been that she recovered her reason and seemed restored."

"Then we are fighting a terrible enemy with our hands tied," said Hanson. "I see that. And these rumours; I scarcely like to think what they imply."

"We must crush them and end the case as soon as possible," answered Hobhouse. "Yet I fear we have not seen the end of it. How long, how long, I wonder?"

"Surely when the legal separation is arranged."

"I don't know," said Hobhouse mournfully. "If Lord Byron was a private man the case would be a nine days' wonder at the worst. But his fame is too wide for him to be forgotten. Whatever happens to him will be of interest in England. I might even say, the world. That is the irony of it. I fear it will be many days before his case is ended. But if we can trample on slander now, all may yet be well."

That was his great hope. To stamp down the rumours before they grew too vast. *But once a breath of scandal is released it starts a flame.*

CHAPTER TWENTY.

It was as Hobhouse had told Hanson, Byron had been almost beside himself since Isabella's desertion. Days of wild despair and dejection soon undid all the good Dr. Le Mann had worked. Augusta spent her days in trying to restore him to some degree of calmness. The sight of her grief at last prevailed and he struggled up and tried to resume his usual habits of going about. All the time, his nerves were frayed to edges. He had written letter after letter to Isabella. She ignored them, but sent messages to Augusta, speaking of her own sufferings, the hope of Byron's repentance in this world, and begging Augusta to consider the benefit he would receive in the next from the measure of severe chastisement in this. All her letters were a mixture of religious hypocrisy and tender concern for herself and the child.

Augusta dared not show them to Byron, but she handed them to Hobhouse when he came.

"Avoid writing to her at all," he said briefly.

"But the worst of it is, Byron clings to the notion that Belle is being over-ruled by her people and is not a free agent. The thought gives him a little comfort and I hate to dispel it."

"By all means keep him happy and hopeful if it can be done, but don't trust Lady Byron. If you must allow her to write to you merely to satisfy Byron, do so. Make no mistake, she is not a puppet in her mother's hands. Of that I am sure."

Byron was now up each day and commenced calling at his club, going about as usual with a brave show of indifference. *But the world he had known had unaccountably changed.* At first he very naturally attributed the unpleasant impressions he received to his own fancy and state of nerves. Yet invitations, previously fixed, were now being politely cancelled, except Melbourne House, where his dear old friend received him tearfully. But now Lady Melbourne was generally alone when he visited her. She puzzled him by

asking him not to come to her usual functions and pleaded her desire to talk to him confidentially. He did not know that she was fighting a battle for his name and honour every hour and doing her utmost to stem the poison cloud that was now hovering over him.

He was conscious, too, that his entrance into clubs was attended by a strange silence. Men looked up at him, then at each other, and the hum of voices died away into murmurings. Scrope Davies always greeted him with great cordiality, that seemed to be aimed at listeners, and Douglas Kinnaird showed a sort of sad sympathy mixed with determination to defy opinion. Others either ignored him or passed on quickly when they met him on his way in or out.

The first time this happened was at his old haunt, The Cocoa Tree. He had gone in search of Hobhouse, asking another member if he had been there that evening. The individual thus addressed looked at him without speaking and turned away. Papers rustled in corners, heads looked over them at him, but no one spoke. He was being "cut," not quite insolently, but very unmistakably. He left the place feeling cold. He could not understand it. From that time onwards he felt a stranger in the club.

One afternoon he drove over to see Lady Melbourne and opened his heart to her. He had not mentioned this subject before.

"Are people mad or am I?" he asked, sitting down in her drawing-room.

She looked at him.

"I truly believe Isabella is," said she with warmth.

"Lady Melbourne," he said wearily, "I have been lying awake night after night trying to think what I've done to cause her to leave me in this manner. Remembering her kindness when she parted from me. She won't answer my letters. She refuses to see me, and I believe her people are keeping her almost a prisoner. It's some devilish trick of her mother's. We have always hated one another like poison. Clermont is her spy, I'm sure of it now."

"Isabella is old enough to act for herself," answered her aunt with asperity. "I've no patience with any woman who allows her people to come between her and her husband. She deserves a good whipping."

"I want to see her. I am sure she would return if I could have an interview. I loathe all this legal business and cold,

stilted letters. Hanson will not let me take the law into my own hands. I could soon finish it if I did ! "

" What would you do ? " she asked.

" Go down and take her away with me and tell the lot of them to go to hell ! " was Byron's defiant reply.

" Isn't that like you and how I wish you could, my boy," said Lady Melbourne. " Byron, if anything happens to make this match of mine a complete failure I shall never forgive myself. It was my doing in the first place. Is there no hope of a reconciliation between you two ? I really believed Isabella loved you."

" I thought so, too. I imagined that she was shy and reserved. But when I remember how she wrote to me for two years, of her own will, not your prompting. . . ." He paused and looked at her.

Lady Melbourne nodded.

" Yes, entirely her own will. I confess it surprised me. I always thought her very prudish."

" It's Lady Milbanke. I'm sure of it. Hobhouse says it's a matter of money. Would you believe it ? I have discovered that Clermont told her I was mad. It appears the silly girl went to Dr. Le Mann about it in earnest."

" I am afraid you frighten her out of her own senses with some of your wild romancing, Byron. But my heart is set on some means of bringing you together again. Pray God it will be all right. Only, Byron my dear, forgive me . . . if you want her to come back, for the love of heaven take more care of yourself. You are not doing so now. I can see that."

She laid her hand kindly on his shoulder and looked at his face.

" I know. I've been going to pieces. I always do, lately, if I'm worried. Poor Augusta has an awful time with me."

Just then the door opened. Lady Melbourne looked up and gave an exclamation of anger. Caroline Lamb had entered.

Byron rose quickly.

She was dressed in dark, sombre garments and looked very pale. She came forward and held out her hand.

" Oh, Byron, let bygones be bygones. Believe me, I pity you from my heart ! " she cried emotionally.

" Don't be a fool, Caroline, and wait till Byron asks you for pity," said Lady Melbourne abruptly.

" Ah, I know you have suffered," said Caroline. He turned away in silence.

" Why did you come in unannounced, pray ? " asked Lady Melbourne. " You know I hate to be disturbed at this time."

" The servant told me who was here," answered Caroline, with a languishing gaze.

" The more reason for stopping out. I am sure Byron has no desire to be bothered with your fooleries at such a time."

" It's all right, Lady Melbourne. So long as Lady Caroline meets me with the courtesy, as she has done to-day, I shall not be afraid to greet her," said he sadly. He was weary now. The strain of the past weeks, the growing sense of isolation, had dispelled whatever anger he had felt against this infatuated creature, who now stood looking at him with an expression of genuine sympathy.

" Oh, thank you for that ! " she cried. " I know I was mad and that I drove you to say cruel things of me, but now, believe me, I have defended you every hour of the day, and when they say . . ."

" Caroline, be silent ! " cried Lady Melbourne.

" No, let her speak," said Byron. " What do they say ? Tell me. There is some slander. That is the reason I am being insulted in the clubs. Lady Caroline, what have you had to defend me from ? "

To his utter amazement, she threw up her hands, burst into tears, and fled from the room.

" There ! as mad as ever," cried Lady Melbourne.

He suddenly seized her hands.

" Is that so ? Is it Caroline's usual hysteria, or more ? "

" My dear Byron. . . ."

" For God's sake tell me the truth ! "

" It is nothing, nothing ! "

He dropped her hands and turned away indifferently.

" Just for a moment I thought there was something you were hiding from me. But you, of all people, wouldn't do that," he said huskily. The tears rushed to her eyes. She could not speak.

The servant entered and announced the arrival of three ladies.

" My dear, you came to-day before I knew," Lady Melbourne began. Again he flashed a look at her.

" Does that matter so very much ? " he asked.

" No, only I thought in your present worried state you would not want to be bored with silly women who only chatter nonsense."

" You're quite right," said he. " Well, I'll come again in a few days and tell you how matters are going."

" Do, do ! "

The visitors had now been shown in and curtseyed to their hostess. Byron knew them all well. Lady Melbourne greeted them and turned away to give orders for tea. He looked at them. Two turned away and blushed. The third, a pretty young girl with whom he had often chatted, shrank back from him with a look of absolute fear.

A chill passed over him. He stood motionless for a moment, then felt a stab of pain when he saw Lady Melbourne greet them affectionately. He passed out without saying good-bye to her. For the first time he doubted his old friend. There was something she knew. She had not spoken the truth.

" Oh, God ! isn't there anybody honest in this damned world ? " he said to himself as he limped heavily down the stairs and out of the house.

He realized now that he was face to face with some peril, and the dormant fighter awoke.

They were keeping him in the dark. Did Hobhouse know he was being cut and scandalized ? What did Caroline mean ? What was Lady Melbourne hiding from him ? Why did that girl shrink back as she had done ? Never mind. He would go out more than ever. Face people fearlessly. Find out for himself. Courage he possessed beyond the usual run of men. He had brooded long enough in his room. Given way like a coward, drank himself into a state of nerves. But this must not be. He must be firm and self-possessed.

His sister was glad to find him making an effort in this direction on his return home.

" Goose, I am going out to the theatre to-night. Would you like to come with me ? " he asked her about six o'clock.

" Not to-night, dear. I am really very tired. Do go and enjoy yourself. It will do you good. Is Mr. Kean acting ?"

" I believe there's a new play on. But I've just received this note. There is a committee meeting. So perhaps it is as well you don't come. They are sure to keep me for hours. I wonder what trouble they are having now. I do hope poor Kean isn't in hot water again."

He talked brightly, more like his old self. Augusta was glad to see him go out looking stronger, and put away all fear as, after changing his dress, he drove off to Drury Lane.

The bills outside announced the appearance of a new actress, Mrs. Mardyn. Kean was not playing.

"It's time I put in an appearance. I believe they are trying to get rid of him on their own account," thought Byron as he entered the theatre and made his way to the committee room. On his way he had to pass up a private staircase that also communicated with the stage. He was half way up when he met one of the actresses descending. He recognized her and smiled. She was little more than a super, but he had tried to get her advanced owing to her good, steady work. To-night she was taking a small part and with it an increase of salary.

"Well, my dear, how are you?" he asked.

"Quite well. And your Lordship?" she answered, with a deep curtsey.

"Oh, considerably better for seeing you!" he said lightly, and touched her curls.

"But why are you looking so serious? Not going to have an attack of stage fright, I hope," he went on. She looked ready to burst into tears.

Glancing up at him she seized his hand and kissed it.

"Oh, my Lord! I'm sorry. . . . God knows I'm sorry!" she cried and ran down the stairs without another word.

Byron smiled to himself, April fashion, and went on his way.

The first thing he heard on entering the room was his own name.

Lord Essex sat at the head of the table. Lord Holland on the left. His old friend Dr. Drury rose and went to greet him, then hurriedly departed.

Kinnaird was absent.

When Byron advanced to the table, no one spoke or rose.

"Well?" said he. "You were speaking of me. What can I do to help you?"

Lord Essex shot a resentful glance at him.

"Come!" said Byron, seating himself at the other end and looking across at Essex. "You all look very glum to-day. I see Mr. Kean is not playing this week. Well, if it's bad business you're conferring about, have him in the bill as quickly as you can. With all his failings, Kean will fill the house for you."

"We are not discussing Mr. Kean." Essex rapped out the words. "It is as well you should know, Lord Byron, that this meeting is held solely on your account."

" Lord Essex is quite correct," added Lord Holland.

Byron threw back his head and looked at the assembled company defiantly.

" Indeed ? " said he. " How very interesting. You did not state that in the letter I received asking me to attend."

" That letter was written formally, weeks ago. It was merely a general invitation. We had not been compelled to alter the object then."

It was Lord Holland who spoke. Peter Lamb sat looking foolish. Mr. Whitbread, a new member, merely gazed at their Lordships open-mouthed. As a commoner he felt too humble to express any opinion of his own. The rest of the committee were evidently in judgment on Lord Byron. He listened and waited.

Lord Essex cleared his throat, rose, slowly polished his glasses, and proceeded.

" This meeting, Lord Byron, is of a very serious nature. It concerns the honour of our National Theatre."

Byron looked at him sternly and his fingers closed on the table.

" It is my painful duty to inform you, my Lord, that under the circumstances, which must be as well known to you as they are, at least, to the general public," he spoke drily, " and to ourselves, that your presence on this committee is now most injurious to the prestige of this house."

Byron rose.

" Indeed, Lord Essex, in what way ? " he demanded.

Essex waved him to resume his seat, but Byron faced him with blazing eyes.

" Go on. Pray, speak out," he cried in a ringing voice.

" It is, as I said before, my painful duty, therefore, to request you to resign at once. At once, Lord Byron."

" For what reason ? "

" The reasons are too well known to need recapitulation here."

" That is a lie ! " cried Byron passionately. " I know of nothing that should cause my resignation. I refuse to resign and I demand a full explanation and an apology from all of you ! "

There was a stir.

" Lord Byron, it will be more fitting to your dignity if you accept his Lordship's statement without demur," said Holland.

"What, in hell's name, do they mean, Lamb?" cried Byron, turning to that gentleman.

"There is no reason for any display of temper," said Essex coldly. "Mr. Lamb has given his vote in support of the measure, and the only one who has refused is Dr. Drury."

"Therefore, he has resigned to-day," added Lord Holland.

Byron limped from his place, down the room and stood beside the Chairman.

"I refuse to leave this room, Lord Essex, until you explain your insulting proposal. Yes, for, by God, it is an insult, and I will challenge any man to refute that!"

Mr. Whitbread whispered to Peter Lamb that there would be a duel. Hadn't they better go?

"Stay where you are and be quiet," answered Lamb.

"I am unaware of anything I have done that renders such a measure as this justifiable," proceeded Byron.

"Do you read the papers, Lord Byron?" asked Essex scornfully.

"If you allude to the coming separation between myself and Lady Byron, I understand you. But what of that? Many men have differences with their wives. That is a private sorrow for myself. It should compel your sympathy, not your scorn."

Try as he would, Byron's voice faltered and the tears rushed to his eyes. He dashed them away.

"In any ordinary case, yes. But the circumstances. . . ." He heard Holland's dull voice droning away.

"I cannot discuss my private affairs here," cried Byron.

"There is no need. You have only to hand in your resignation and the matter is ended," said Essex.

"The reason first!" persisted Byron in a fury.

Lord Holland rose.

"I, for one, protest against prolonging this discussion. This is, or should be, an assembly of gentlemen, and there are subjects unfit for debate. We have no desire to hear any details, my Lord."

The room swam round Byron and he gripped the chair that stood near. Anger and pain reacted in a feeling of faintness, but he straightened himself, trembling.

"What are you hinting at now?" he asked.

"I hint at nothing," replied Holland. "The facts of which I speak are known to all of us and to you best of all."

"Therefore, Lord Byron," said Essex, "you had best

consult your own interests. Kindly hand in your resignation and so save yourself further trouble, and the committee the very undesirable task of expelling you."

He resumed his seat, and there was a deathly silence in the room. All looked at Byron, whose face was white with anger and surprise.

"Mr. Whitbread, what is the next item we have to discuss?" drawled Essex.

Byron threw back his head, his eyes flashing and his lips set.

"Understand that I utterly refuse to resign, and if you dare to force me you shall answer for it publicly. If you have anything to say to me, I shall be in my box."

Making a bold effort to control the pain in his foot, which was now giving him physical torture, Byron slowly left the room. Outside he leaned against the wall and pressed his hands to his brow. He felt sick and faint with a strange foreboding. *What was this mystery? Why would no one speak?*"

The strain of facing so many hostile minds now told on him, and he longed to give way to a wild outburst of emotion. He glanced round. Not here. Not in the sight of any man or woman. No one should ever guess that he was weak. Pulling his cloak around him, he limped down the stairs and made his way proudly to his box.

The house was full. All Society was, as usual, bestowing its patronage on the new venture. Lady Melbourne was in a box opposite. He saw Lord Essex enter and sit beside her.

Feeling sick at heart and stone cold with the after-effect of the meeting, he drew back into the corner of his own seclusion, and leaning his head against the wall tried to still the throbbing and beating of his brows by pressing his icy hand upon them.

He longed for some friendly voice—Scrope Davies or Hobby—and wondered if they were present. But he had not the strength to rise and go in search of them for the moment. The orchestra entered and were tuning up; he heard the buzz of voices. He felt so ill that he wondered if he was going to faint. It passed off presently. The music was very quiet and sweet. The audience became quieter, and he sat up and looked at the curtain. Anyway, he would see the play out. It might distract his thoughts.

"Good!" he said to himself, as the lights were lowered. Then, rising, he moved nearer to the front of the box.

A sudden outburst of wild hissing, booing, hooting and shrieking followed his action. The play commenced amidst such a tumult that it was quite impossible to hear a word of it.

"I suppose they want Kean," thought Byron.

The noise increased and he looked round to discover the cause of it. It was not so dark that he could not perceive the sea of faces beneath, around and above. He started up.

"Good God!" he cried aloud. *They were all turned towards him hissing and groaning.* For a second he thought he had gone mad. Was it a dream? People shrieking insults at him. Men and women in the stalls pointing him out to their friends. Oranges and missiles flung into his box. A bottle narrowly escaped cutting his head open.

He stood motionless for a time silently looking down on them. He might have been a carved statue, rigid from head to foot while the storm raged around him. He was growing cold, and wondered if this was death. In such moments the brain is stunned into a curious calm.

Lady Melbourne gave a cry and tried to leave her box.

"Let me go to him! Are the people out of their senses?" she cried; but Essex held her firmly.

"You can do nothing. You must not go near him. It would endanger your own reputation," he said sternly.

"Look! My God, they will kill him!" cried Lady Melbourne, for another object was hurled through the air and fell close beside him, crashing into fragments. The glass did not cut him. Still he stood there as if rooted to the ground. The stage was empty, for the actors had fled in terror. The curtain slowly descended.

Byron remembered the artists. He must not ruin their chances. He drew away out of sight while Mr. Rae came forward to beg the kind sympathy of the audience for the artists in this new venture. The curtain rose again and the play began in a fair degree of silence.

Soon Mrs. Mardyn made her entrance.

At once a new disturbance arose.

"Harlot! Byron's woman! . . . Shameless! . . . Get off!" yelled the people in the gallery. The poor actress stood still and gazed at them in utter bewilderment.

"You're not his sister. . . . Get off and let her play!"

After a hopeless effort to continue the actress fled. Byron

did not understand the meaning of the words. He saw the curtain lowered a second time. Heard another speech from Mr. Rae, who informed the audience that Mrs. Mardyn was unwell and that another lady would take her part. Ironical catcalls and derisive shouts followed this announcement. The curtain rose again and this time the play proceeded. Byron was sitting back in his chair when he heard the door of the box open.

"Go back; go back to your place, my dear friend!" he whispered as Lady Melbourne rushed in.

"Byron!" she panted. "Come with me now. My carriage is at the door. My dear boy, you must not wait until the play is over. Come with me now."

"No, no! Leave me alone," he cried out.

"Hush, hush! . . . They will hear you!" said she.

"For God's sake, tell me the truth!" He gripped her arm. "What does this mean?" he cried.

"I'll tell you to-morrow. Come now, unless you want to make me ill. I can't bear it. Oh, Byron, do come with me and let me know you are safe at home!"

He laughed bitterly.

"I have no home!" said he.

"My dear child, do as I ask," she insisted.

He took up his cloak and prepared to follow. They were seen by those nearest and the news spread through the theatre like wildfire. When they reached the door another hostile crowd had gathered round the entrance.

"Now, go back," said he.

"Not until I have seen you safely to your house." But he gently put her aside and stepped into the midst of the people, who seemed to fall away as he passed. Inside the theatre the play was once interrupted by the sound of people scrambling to the doors to get a sight of Byron before he left.

What is there in the force of personality that can silence a rabble and awe the vulgar? For Byron, with his eyes blazing and his pale face immovable, walked steadily erect through the medley of creatures, shouting and cursing, not without words that branded into his brain like flame.

"Get home to your sister and let her kiss you!" shrieked a woman.

"Rotten cur!" yelled a man, shaking his fist at him.

He gave no sign that he heard, but moved on. It was a strange sight to see that one proud, slender figure limping

slowly in the midst of the yelling mob. But not one man had the temerity to touch him, and those standing nearest stopped their shouting to look in wonder at the unearthly, pale face.

He saw a hackney coach and hailed it. It drove up to the pavement and he managed to reach it without interference. In a few seconds the place was clear again. The cab had driven off and the people hurried back to see the finish of the play.

"Where to, sir?" asked the driver, suddenly pulling up and coming to the door.

"Oh, the Cocoa Tree, St. James's Street," said Byron.

His brain was on fire. He felt he could not go home yet. He wanted to see Davies or Hobhouse. He must tell someone what had happened, and he did not wish to distress Augusta. But why did people speak of his sister? Some devilry was afoot. Who had started it? Clermont? Caroline Lamb? No. He remembered her face that afternoon.

He felt queer in the head. With a terrible rush of terror he grasped his temples.

"This is the end . . . the end!" he cried aloud. "It's coming! Mary first and now me! By God, I'll end it before that happens!"

For years he had dreaded insanity. It was in his race, and he feared the blight. Yes, if he found it was not fancy, if his brain was tottering, better to finish the whole thing. He lay back planning. It would be quite easy. His pistols were always handy. Hobhouse would know. He would look after Augusta. It would be so much better for everyone.

Then he seemed to faint, for when he opened his eyes the cab had stopped and the driver was standing at the door.

"I'm sorry . . ." said Byron. "I didn't realize. . . ."

"Shall I drive you to a doctor, sir?" asked the man kindly. The sight of Byron's face had startled him.

"No; no, thanks. I'm all right. Just give me your arm." The man assisted him to enter.

"By gum, he do look queer, though!" he reflected as he drove away.

Byron slowly pulled himself together and ascended the stairs.

The club-room was empty and he sank into a chair with a sigh of relief. He ordered some brandy and remained before the fire, drinking it and thinking.

The clock struck eleven and some members came into the room. He took no heed of them and at first they did not perceive him. He lay back for awhile with his eyes closed, and his nerves were calmer but terribly acute. He could hear all that was going on. Other men entered, and a great excitement prevailed.

" By Jupiter, you should have been there ! " cried one man ; " why, the whole house rose and hooted him in his box ! "

Byron sat up and listened. His chair screened him from the others, who had gathered round a table at the other end of the room.

" And serve him damn well right, I say ! Why, the man's a degenerate. It's horrible," cried another voice.

Byron recognized it. Lord Alvanly, one of the Regent's friends.

" I move he's expelled from this club," cried a third.

Then Douglas Kinnaird's voice broke in angrily.

" It's a lie, I'll swear it is ! The whole thing is a lie, and Hobhouse swears it's a conspiracy got up by those damned relations of his wife's to ruin poor Byron."

" There's no smoke without fire, take my word for it."

" It's a lie," protested Kinnaird.

" Thank God for one friend," thought Byron, and he rose and faced them all. If an apparition had appeared they could not have received a greater shock. He looked scarcely human in his despair and anguish as he met their gaze.

The strain of the evening had transformed him from himself to a wild, hunted, despairing creature with the eyes of a madman and the pallor of the dead.

" Kinnaird, speak out," he cried, in a terrible voice ; " tell me before these men what I am accused of, that I may give them the lie ! "

But the others dispersed into corners and whispered together. Some sat down and gave orders for wine. Some commenced playing cards. No one remained there confronting him in less than a second.

" Byron, old friend, go home and rest," said Kinnaird, going to him quickly.

" Rest ? Where shall I find it ? " said Byron, sinking down again in a chair. " Never until the grave closes over me. And the sooner that happens the better, I think."

He spoke under his breath now, and the others, inwardly relieved at this termination to the scene, went on with their

own pursuits. No one desired a quarrel with Byron to-night. He looked too dangerous.

"Now, old man, go home," said Kinnaird kindly. "I'll come with you."

Byron looked up at him.

"Kinnaird, speak," he said. "Anything is better than this suspense. I've faced hell to-night if ever a man has. I can face it again, but . . . my God, man! . . . I can't fight in the dark!"

Kinnaird glanced over his shoulder.

"What's the meaning of it all?" asked Byron. "What have I done?"

"Well, Byron, if you haven't been told you ought to have been, that's all. It's damned cowardly to accuse any man and never give him a chance to meet the accusation."

Byron started and opened his eyes wide.

"Mind, I don't believe a word. Remember that. And I would not tell you if you had not asked."

"Go on," said Byron.

"They are saying that you and Mrs. Leigh . . . that the reason your wife has left you is that . . . that you and Mrs. Leigh are more to each other than blood relations should be. . . . Forgive me, Byron. I don't believe one word."

Never, to the end of his days, did Kinnaird forget the look on Byron's face. It gradually dawned, like the coming of a flame, and broke, as flame does, enveloping all.

He said nothing, but staggered to his feet, put out a trembling hand to repel the other's proffered arm, and suddenly dashed from the room in a blind heat, out of the club into the streets, limping along the pavement, often hitting his shoulder against the wall. The world spun madly round him.

On and on till he found himself near his own house. The rabble had been awful enough, but now he knew why. It burnt into his soul, scarring it, killing something within him. He was a pariah! All that day he had felt something coming towards him. It had grown and grown with every fresh development of this hideous cloud. The suspense, the mystery, the silences of the clubs, the scene with the committee, and last of all the shrieks and hisses of the low creatures who had hunted him like a beast. He had thought suspense the worst, but a second torture outstripped the first. He reached his room with Kinnaird's words leaping before his

eyes like so many taunting devils. If he had never known, it would have been more merciful. In less than a brief day he had looked into the depths of human nature, seen it in its vileness, realized the well of hatred and malignancy that could exist in the heart of man and woman. His trust was shattered from that hour, and the harp that had sung of beauty, love, and the lyric glory of a world he had loved in boyhood, that was shattered too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Byron sat in his armchair for some time scarcely conscious that Fletcher was waiting for him, hovering about the room quietly. His calm, kind face was anxious, but he had smiled a welcome as usual. He could see that Byron was on the verge of a collapse.

He had provided for all emergencies. A cheerful fire was burning, the dressing-gown was laid in readiness, books and wine were on a table near at hand.

The house was very still after the stormy theatre, terribly deserted and lonely. Augusta had retired. Fletcher asked:

"Would your Lordship like to speak to Mrs. Leigh?"

"No, no. Let her rest, for goodness' sake."

He looked round the room and shuddered. He almost preferred the howling mob, the sense of danger, to this intense quiet. In this room Isabella had slept, scarcely allowing her husband to kiss her good-night. Here Ada was born, in the big canopied bed hung with rose-coloured satin.

Byron sighed and drank a glass of wine.

"Is there anything I can do, my Lord?" said Fletcher.

"No. Wait a minute. . . . You can shoot me if you like," said his Lordship; "I'm too tired to do it myself."

"Are you ill, my Lord? Let me prepare your bed."

"I shall not sleep yet. Leave me alone, Fletcher. Don't worry yourself. I didn't mean it. Good-night."

Fletcher lit fresh candles, poked the fire and lingered over it.

"Fletcher," said Byron, "I think we shall go away very soon. Prepare for a long stay in Italy."

"Very good, my Lord. May I ask when you propose starting?"

"As soon as everything is settled here. As soon as . . . possible. Let us shake the dust of this accursed country off our feet. It's loathsome!"

Fletcher looked disconsolate for a moment. He loved England and hated foreign parts with equal intensity.

" Now you detest me, don't you ? " said Byron.

" Please don't say that, my Lord. Believe that I love you more than words can express," replied Fletcher, allowing the man to peep through the servant.

" You love me ? You're not bitten with the plague, then ? Many people have professed to love me. Now they're all of one mind. I'm vile. A monster."

Fletcher poured wine into his master's glass and looked at him tenderly.

" Please, my Lord, don't say such things. You are not well. I think you're tired."

Byron rose suddenly and walked about the room, although his over-strained foot could scarcely respond to his will.

" Will you sacrifice yourself to come to me ? " he asked.

" Willingly, my Lord."

" You don't mind being branded as my servant and therefore unfit for human society ? "

" I don't care what people say, my Lord. I only know you are very dear to me. All I ask is that I may serve you to the end of my life."

Byron uttered a little cry and clasped his head in his two hands.

" All right, Fletcher ; don't worry," was all he could say.

Fletcher retired. When he had gone Byron wept. The blessed rain of tears was welcome. He made no effort to restrain his emotion. The house was quiet and the fire was bright. He grew calmer soon and sat gazing into the glow, hugging himself in the big chair. The door creaked loudly and made him start. He got up to see if anyone was there. Opening the door wide he almost expected spectral forms to appear. There was nothing but the dark staircase with deep shadows in the corners and cold winds from below.

A lamp was burning softly, hanging from chains in the painted ceiling of the hall. The grandfather clock ticked loudly and regularly in the still air.

Byron, growing restless, took a candle and went down the stairs, apprehensive of shadows, his nerves on edge.

He could not have explained why he came down or why he wandered into the drawing-room, then the dining-room and then the library, where he had often quarrelled with Isabella. Here he set down his candle and sat by the smouldering fire. It hissed a little. He shuddered and looked over his shoulder. A deadly quiet then reigned in the fire as it did

everywhere. It was so still that one could hear the silence. But soon the wind had risen and sighed in the trees opposite.

Isabella had said farewell to him in this room. He had kissed Ada and never knew it was for ever. He had loved his wife as much as his stricken heart would allow him to care for another after Mary's loss, had striven to forget his first ideal. But somehow her face always rose before him. What he could not give in love he had given in respect. He had tried to do what was right. And all this reverence, these good resolutions and the intense happiness he had known in the possession of his child, had been cruelly smashed to atoms by the mercenary hatred of Isabella's parents and her weakness. Was she so weak? It was this thought that made matters worse. *Who had created this unspeakable lie against Augusta and himself?*

He shivered again and, rising, walked to the window. There he stood gazing into the darkness of the street.

Great black shadows waved opposite where the trees reared towards the clouds. Rain began to patter softly, like ghostly fingers on the window pane, tapping to come in. A bell, tinkling on a horse's collar, passed loudly and faded into silence; a gust of wind blew it away finally, and the rain came heavily against the glass in violent torrents.

The clock in the hall chimed.

Byron shivered and shrank against the curtains, closing his eyes. He was cold, stone cold. His hands were trembling and his chest ached.

The small clock on the mantelpiece ticked with an exasperating regularity. He longed to smash it as he had done his watch, one night in this same room. Suddenly it chimed, as it seemed, with a great volume of sound, and struck three. A deep bell from an adjacent church tolled on the wind.

Nervous and shaking he left the window and opened a drawer in his desk. There was a phial of laudanum there. He reached out for it with cold fingers. An overwhelming desire for mental sensation possessed him. Anything . . . oblivion at length . . . any escape from reality and pain.

He hesitated a moment and shut the drawer. Why? He had taken it freely enough lately. But Augusta would be worried and then there was Ada . . . but that seemed a reason why . . . he suffered when he thought of the baby. The awful quiet had strung his nerves to breaking-point. The

chilly night froze him to the bone. He could have shrieked aloud for warmth, love, sunshine, humanity. Yet his lips were silent. He stood still awhile, suffering intensely, and even tried to pray. But he was not used to it. It would not come.

With a wild determination he pulled the drawer open again and secured the phial. There was a little in it. He drank; then stood, his heart beating like a hammer, waiting for results.

They came gradually. A softening of sounds and a sense of warmth throughout his whole being. A numbness, like the wrapping of velvet about body and brain, a wavering of mind as though sleep was playing with him, making shy advances and smiling. The clock ticked less loudly and then ceased altogether. The rain had stopped pattering. In reality it was pouring down heavily on the paving-stones outside. He smiled. It was comfortable. What a blessing laudanum was. It solved so many difficulties, it changed the entire outlook on life. What had he been thinking of? He tried to recall it, but it had gone. Anyway, it was something not worth recalling.

Byron moved across the room, holding corners of tables and backs of chairs. He had remembered a bright fire in his room. This was dismal. It was warm and cheerful upstairs. Why was he here? All nonsense! He decided to return.

It was a long way. The stairs were difficult. Once he nearly gave up the journey, as the walls were slipping from him and he was falling into a void. But he managed to keep on until he reached his room. He opened the door and found himself inside.

There was a wide desert between him and the bed, yet he reached it at once and fell upon it, his head racing madly in space and his form inert. To be still and safe on a flat surface was so very satisfactory. One does not have to be careful of falling.

Darkness closed in. He was profoundly thankful. A sense of relief comforted him.

Presently, out of the blackness, a rosy light appeared, and Grecian maidens floated past him bearing flowers to the Temple. Garlands of purple and scarlet, incense in golden bowls, sprays of pink blossom, baskets of grapes and fruits. The sky was sapphire blue rising to azure, the sand was silver by an emerald sea and the girls laid their offerings at the altar on which was carved in flaming white the word "Freedom."

Byron, no longer lying on his bed, met Augusta draped in classic robes and bearing a large sword.

"Dearest," she said, in her own sweet way, "here is your sword. One day you will lay it at this altar's foot and give yourself for freedom's sake. But not yet. The time is not yet come. You must suffer much more before you can be free. Poor soul! It is very hard, for you have endured enough to madden ordinary mortals. But to complete your course you must go on suffering. I cannot help you. It is not in my power. Therefore I suffer too. My consolation is to share your pain."

She passed away and Mary merged into view, pale and distracted. She was not the calm, sweet Mary of his youth, but the raving, mad creature he had seen at Hastings.

"You must always suffer! I shall always suffer with you. I cry aloud to help you, but I must also help myself. My race claims me . . . for ever! I grieve for you! Forgive me!"

"Mary . . . come back . . . let me remember you as I knew you . . . not as you haunt me now!" cried Byron, trying to reach her as she faded away. But she vanished, wailing.

Augusta reappeared and took his hand.

"Some day you will find another. Mary was not for you. You must be very patient. There is someone else."

The sky turned purple and the mists rose. Out of the coming shadows Caroline Lamb darted, grinning and beating her breast. She also was mad, shrieking with laughter as she vanished into the dark.

Soon after, rising majestic and holy, Newstead Abbey reared its noble walls out of the sea, so quiet and stately. Byron heard the splashing of waters, and a huge dog, black and white, his long silky hair dripping from his swim, bounded towards him, wagging his great tail joyously, barking with delight.

"Boatswain! my own dear friend!" cried Byron, falling on his knees to hug the animal. A dark hand snatched the dog away. Byron knelt there, trembling in the mist. His mother, shrieking insults at him and cursing him for his lame foot, hurled herself into view. She faded like the rest.

"Mother, mother! for God's sake give me love, give me tender thoughts! I want you. . . . I want a mother's love!" The mists grew darker still.

At last, in deep, cold silence, Isabella rose, relentless, smiling, self-contained, in her grey dress. She held Ada in her arms. Byron made a desperate effort to take the child, but Isabella retreated, keeping the infant close to her.

" Never while I live ! " said she. " You shall never take my child. She shall be kept in ignorance of your sins. I will not injure her mind with knowledge of such a father ! "

" Belle, have pity ! " cried Byron. " It's a lie . . . you know it's a lie ! Leave me one spark of hope . . . the child. I'll live for her. I'll do all in my power to be worthy ! "

Isabella smiled scornfully and vanished.

As she did so, another figure took her place. It grew out of her body and assumed tremendous proportions, then hardened until it became solid stone. In the dreadful hand it held a whip of steel that gleamed and threw out shafts far and wide, and round the figure's head a serpent writhed.

Byron stood ready to fight, unafraid when a giant confronted him.

" Are you Death ? " he asked.

" *No ! I am Hypocrisy, and my whip is Slander,*" the figure replied in a mighty voice which seemed to envelop the universe. Then, raising its arm it slashed Byron across the breast, leaving a deep wound in the heart, which was laid bare and torn, unable to be covered, beating on, open . . . open for all the world to see and censure. He shrieked aloud, screamed for mercy, laughed in his madness as the pain racked him . . . and there before his eyes the beloved Abbey crumbled while the emerald sea swept over him, bearing the giant away and swirling round his body. He was set down upon a place where colour blazed and women offered him their lips to kiss, drew him to them, giving him wine and even fire in glistening glass.

He fought them, hit them with all his strength ; but being exhausted, fell down among them at last and let them have their way. One frantic effort to free himself made him cry out aloud as he tried to push the encircling arms from him. They were strong, they refused to be repulsed. He gave in, gasping for breath and sobbing wildly.

Then he opened his heavy eyes. The bedroom whirled into being and the rose-coloured curtains were waving before him. No vampire maidens clasped him. Only Fletcher's honest face presented itself, bending over him, and it was Fletcher's arms that held him down.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

From that time until the day arrived for the signing of the separation, Byron kept his room. In reply to Augusta's entreaties to come downstairs, he secluded himself and sent a letter begging her to make arrangements to return to Newstead as soon as possible, as the house would soon be closed and it was best she should get ready.

He said nothing to her of the rumour, but sent for Hobhouse.

"You've done your best and more than your best for me, Hobby," he said; "but you and Hanson have a hopeless fight, and you know it. I am leaving England for ever. You know why. And so do I now!" he added with intensity.

Hobhouse was silent. The history of that terrible day was known to him. Of the night of dreams and terror Byron never spoke. But the iron had entered his soul. He was outwardly cold and hard.

"Perhaps I ought to have spoken to you earlier. But we could not believe it ourselves," said Hobhouse.

"My little sister! The one friend I've had from my boyhood, almost a second mother to me. Hobby, she stood between me and my mother's taunts and abuses, and guided me for years. The one pure font of love left . . . and some devil has poisoned it!"

He suddenly caught up a paper and held it out.

"By God! They may break my heart, but they shall not crush my spirit, and they can't silence me. Read that!"

His friend read it.

"Born in a garret, in the kitchen bred. . ." It was a withering denunciation of the creature Clermont. So pitiless, so true, that the writer's anger seemed to leap out from the page.

"I'm sending that to John Murray with orders to print some fifty copies for distribution. If I have any friends left they shall know who is responsible for this."

"Is it wise?"

"I've done with caution, my friend. Let it go." He

thrust it into an envelope and sealed it. Then seized a pen and wrote the address.

"Now, Hobhouse, I leave Augusta's name to you to defend. Don't try to protect mine, that's hopeless."

"Is it?" said Hobhouse firmly. "Byron, your honour and your good name are more to me than my own, *and I tell you that so long as I live no one will dare to breathe that foul lie openly. God knows what they may do in secret!*"

"Who started it?" cried Byron.

Hobhouse looked at him sadly.

"It can't be Belle. I dare not think it. She is the mother of my child. Whatever happens I will never renounce Ada. I will keep my right of claiming her. That is left me."

"Do so. By all means do so," said Hobhouse warmly. "Have you any plans for the future?"

"None. All the plans I ever had have been shattered by other hands. Oh, I shall live my life to the full, no doubt. Only not in the way I once hoped, perhaps."

"Come, Byron, the best way to kill these rumours is to live it to the highest and best."

Byron suddenly turned on him with a look of unutterable anguish.

"Hobby, don't! For God's sake, don't! Not just now. You mean it so well . . . you're always trying to inspire me upwards. But there comes a time in a man's life when he's hurled into reality, when life lies naked and bare before him, when he lies bruised and wounded. One can't go on looking up!"

He broke off and flung himself down on the sofa, rocking himself with pain.

The tears started to his eyes and he fought to keep them back, smiled, clenched his hands, threw back his head in defiance, and then, with a low sob, broke down and wept as though his heart would break.

Hobhouse was beside him in an instant. They sat together for some time in silence. The choking sobs shook Byron's frame until he was almost exhausted.

"It's finished me! I can't look forward now!" he muttered.

"Hush, Byron; you can, you must," answered Hobhouse. How gentle and protecting he could be in such moments. His own heart was aching with sorrow for the pain he could not heal.

"I want Ada! God, I've no anchor now to cling to, not one. At the worst Augusta told me she would come abroad with me for awhile. I dare not let her come. And how can I tell her why? It's too horrible."

He sat up and passed a shivering hand across his brow.

"I haven't seen her for days. I don't know what to say to her. Am I to blast her life and tell her this thing? Look into her kind, loving eyes and see the pain in them? Hasn't she done everything for me—adopted poor Mary's child? Is she to pay for that?"

"If you will trust me, I can tell her and spare you both. She must know for her own protection. But I can explain in a few words."

Byron gripped his arm.

"Why can't I live at Newstead with her to visit me, and you and the few that still care?"

"Why not? Later, if not now," said Hobhouse. "Don't sell it unless it must go. Your works are not decreasing in sale. Try to keep Newstead. You will come back after awhile."

"I want to keep it," said Byron slowly. "It is part of myself. It belongs to my race."

"Yes, and a very great one too, in spite of all!" answered Hobhouse. He had touched the right chord, for a quick look of pride crossed Byron's tear-stained face, and he sat up erect.

"You come of a race of fighters, Byron. Your ancestors faced great odds on one sort of battlefield, you on another."

"Theirs was open warfare. I have been stabbed in the dark!"

Byron rose, and Hobhouse watched him walk to the window and look down at the street, now rapidly filling with carriages. It was well on towards evening. This was the time when Byron had dressed himself and gone in state as the guest of honour to the greatest houses in the land, to be surrounded by worshipping men and women. "Who wanted him now?" thought his friend sadly. Nay, if he drove up to most of those houses the door would be shut in his face, or if he entered the house it would be to receive fresh insults.

"What are you thinking of, Hobby?" asked Byron abruptly.

"Tell me your thoughts first," said Hobhouse with a smile.

"I was far away. Do you know, I had almost forgotten you were not waiting for me to dress and come along with you to Holland House or the Countess of Jersey's, as we did . . .

when was it ?—four years ago, when London had gone mad because I wrote a few verses, and set me up on a pedestal. Well, they have hurled me down, with a vengeance."

Hobhouse looked startled. He had no idea that their thoughts had been so close. Byron saw the look.

" So you were thinking the same thing ? " he said slowly.

" Almost," answered Hobhouse.

" That's a secret I discovered years ago. That thoughts can travel from one mind to another when they are in sympathy," said Byron with a curious look at him. " Some day you'll understand how it was that Mary called me back to her."

" Does the loss of all this social life mean much to you ? " asked Hobhouse, only anxious to divert his thoughts from that one topic. " You often told me you despised it all."

" Yes and no," answered Byron slowly. " When we live in the midst of a whirl of excitement, it wearies. But, looking back, can you ever imagine I ever wished it all to end like this ? "

Hobhouse rose and went to him.

" There is always the future. Look forward, I say."

He met Byron's eyes fixed on his own with a look of anguish.

" Why, why invent this foul lie ? " he cried. " If Isabella's people wanted to get her away from me because of money, as you say, she has plenty of reasons for deserting me. God knows we quarrelled. We are not suited to each other. I am too wild, reckless . . . but the worst of my faults are the ordinary sins of our time, no more. Why invent this poison to turn the public mind against me ? It is that foul worm, Clermont. I loathed her from the first. But Belle ! . . ." He broke off in agitation.

" All these weeks, while you have been . . . ill, Byron, Hanson and myself have been at work on the matter. I can tell you why now."

Byron threw himself down in a chair.

" Mind, I don't wish to hurt you by reflecting on Lady Byron. You still try to defend her and speak well of her. But Clermont has merely acted as pawn in the Milbanke game. They tried to prove you mad. Why ? "

" God knows ! " said Byron.

" To get full possession of your affairs and annul the will you had made in favour of your sister. They could not know, of course, that you had to provide for Medora, Mary's child.

When you married Lady Byron her father was on the verge of financial ruin. I have discovered much. Lady Milbanke planned the match and thought you were wealthy—thought your writings and your fame would bring great gain to their family. Why, by the marriage settlements, Byron, you gave your wife a fortune, and she brought you a mere pittance in return."

"For God's sake, don't speak of that now!" cried Byron.

"It's a factor. We have to consider it to explain this business. Now, at the time they had expectations from the uncle, Lady Milbanke's brother, Lord Wentworth, and they offered a reversionary interest in the settlements as a set-off against the money you were giving them by the sale of Newstead."

"It isn't sold."

Hobhouse put his hand on Byron's arm.

"Listen, Byron," said he. "They never anticipated that it would not be sold. Lady Milbanke never ceased pestering me about it, and when Lord Wentworth died and the money came immediately to them, they knew that part of it must come eventually to Lady Byron and you. It was just at the time of his death that all the trouble began. You in debt here, hence the insanity plan. Lady Milbanke was furious about your will and I believe she hates Augusta as much as she does you. Now having failed to prove their case, your wife deserts you. You show fight. They know that if it comes to court the Milbanke family cut a despicable figure in public. Why, it would have ruined them. We could have proved the case against them to the hilt. *What do they do but cover their own treachery by this abominable slander*—the only crime that ruins a man, makes him a pariah, outside the pale of society?"

Byron started up, his face set and determined.

"And all these weeks," continued Hobhouse, "while you have been shattered, writing letters to your wife, almost too ill to do a thing for yourself, they have been spreading this incest rumour and working up public feeling against you. Your name is too great and your fame so wide that they had to create an abnormal charge to save their own cowardly skins. And this, Byron, is the cause of it all."

"By God, Hobhouse, what have you done?" cried Byron. "Why didn't you come and tell me this weeks ago? Ill or not I would have fought them tooth and nail, and will now!

I won't sign the separation ! We'll have it out to the bitter end ! "

Hobhouse raised a protesting hand, but Byron raged.

" It's plain, it's clear ! Oh, I can go through with it. I won't be driven out like this. Go to Hanson and tell him I refuse. What in hell's name are you looking at ? Why don't you speak ? "

Hobhouse came and laid his hand on his shoulder.

" Byron, be calm. I tell you this to show you that you can return with your head erect, claim your daughter in the future, fling away this nightmare of sorrow and go forward with your great work. Do you think, if it could have been crushed, that I would lend a hand to your signing that paper to-morrow ? No. But there was one thing that tied Hanson and held us in honour bound to keep the case from coming into court. This slander is secret ; it will die. *But if poor Mary Musters' name had been dragged into the searching light of day, as it must have been* . . . You see, Byron, they have the right to examine every year of your past life. Would they have spared her ? "

Byron's eyes opened wide and he tried to speak, but no words came to his lips.

" The curse of Annesley ! It chains your destiny," said Hobhouse sadly. " It gives these devils the power. Oh, how I wish you had never gone back to her, never seen her ! "

There was a long pause.

" It had to be," answered Byron dreamily. " Love knows no rules of caution. Who could foresee ? No, Hobhouse, I won't regret it. I'll cling to that one star. Our souls flashed together and we knew heaven for a little while. God bless you for what you've done. You were right. I'll sign and end the case, and then . . . good-bye ! "

Tears rushed into the eyes of his friend. How many years had they been brothers ! From the old days in Cambridge, when the dreamy boy, who annoyed him by his dandyisms, had suddenly become his dearest friend. He, like all, had fallen under the magic of Byron's spell.

" I'll come abroad with you for awhile," he said gently.

" That is very good of you. But I must not mar your destiny. Your work is here, in England. God alone knows what my future is meant to be."

He was changed now. The early poetry, the boyishness had gone. Instead, a new Byron had emerged, for ever. The

complex emotions dormant but not dead. He had the look of a man who sees his vessel drifting on the rocks and cares nothing for the end.

"Hobby," said he, "if there is any future for me, I must feel sure of myself. I can fight the outer foe, despise these slanders. It's the dread of myself that holds me back. Have you ever known what it is to need the sympathy, the assurance from other lips that all is well? You all think me so very dominant, so full of energy. The worst of it is, I'm not. I need someone to guide my life. I hoped that Isabella would do it. Augusta is the only soul beside yourself that ever had any real power. Had my poor Mary been stronger, she could have held me safe. A strange confession, isn't it? A man should be self-sufficient. I never was."

"How I wish you could be," answered Hobhouse gently; "for unless we strengthen our own souls and shut out the world, keep the fortress of our own inner self safe from this violation of others, we are always at the mercy of the blows of fortune."

"Ah, Brutus!" said Byron with a smile. "Yes, you rather remind me of him."

He envied the great strength, the grand dignity and calm power of his friend's nature. Hobhouse was full of feeling, as tender as a woman in suffering or weakness, but he never seemed to have any trouble of his own. He could always absorb the woes of others. To Byron he had been a tower of strength in the past.

It was on the tip of Byron's tongue to accept the offer that Hobhouse had made. But in the midst of his own desolation he realized how English Hobhouse was, how all his interests lay in the land that he was now leaving, perhaps for ever. No man should ruin his future for him. That Byron determined. He closed his lips and turned away in silence, fighting down the bitter loneliness that swept over him at that moment. Augusta wanted to accompany him abroad, had written to her husband and obtained the permission. The remembrance of a task yet unperformed made him wince with pain.

"Hobhouse, there's one thing I shrink from. I can't face it. My sister wants to come with me. Heaven knows I want to take her. But you understand how impossible that is."

"I will explain to her. She will understand," said Hobhouse.

" Yes, it is best that I go alone. Poor Fletcher comes ; he won't hear of leaving me."

" I'm thankful to hear that. He is a splendid fellow."

" Hobby, there's more genuine goodness and true feeling in that man than in the whole of my so-called friends who now enjoy murdering my reputation," said Byron.

" Fletcher has earned his place in the story ! " said Hobhouse.

" And you . . ."

" Wait, Byron. I have done so little. It ought to have been possible for me to save you from all this."

" No, honesty can never fight cold-blooded treachery. You could only take up honourable weapons for me, Hobby."

Hobhouse drew himself up.

" Byron, to the end of my life, I swear to you, your name shall never suffer defilement in my presence, and anyone who dares even to listen to slander against you, no matter who they are, is henceforth no friend of mine."

So they stood together in the quiet room. The Pilgrim of Eternity was about to set forth on a voyage to the unknown sphere of new lands, new faces, and strange fortune, while the other was left at his post to serve and guard the one being he had loved beyond the ordinary love of man for man.

The parting of the ways had come for both.

But there was little said on either side. No need for words. The friendship of many years became a sacrament that night.

Byron's way was smoothed during the next few days by the quiet, unobtrusive skill of Hobhouse, who took up all the management of the separation deed. The signing passed off very quietly in Mr. Hanson's office.

There was no display of emotion now on Byron's face as he penned his name. It all seemed quite an ordinary affair. Then an interview with Augusta, arranged when Byron was out, and she learnt the truth from the gentle, chivalrous friend who spoke to her so kindly and broke the horrible reality by his healing words.

" My dear, let the thought of it die away now," said Hobhouse. " Don't let a trace of it show in your face when you take farewell of our poor Byron. He must go away for a time, until the whole thing is forgotten. You and I must remain here to serve him still."

Augusta sat, a little stunned by the blow. In the purity of her own mind she could not understand how anyone could

even conceive such a suspicion against her. Hobhouse saw her bewilderment.

"*Don't try to reason it out*," said he. "*Remember that such foul thoughts can only originate in depraved minds.*"

"You are right, Mr. Hobhouse. It is Mrs. Clermont."

"Let us hope so, for many reasons," he replied.

"Oh, it can't be Belle! She would never accuse me of such a thing. Why, she has written to me constantly, always vowed the utmost affection for me, even after she refused to return to poor Byron. It can't be Belle!" cried Augusta, in distress.

"It is too late now to trouble ourselves as to the origin of it. We can hope and pray that it will die down. Byron thought you ought to know, but he had not the heart to tell you."

"Ah, I thought something terrible had happened, for he has avoided me from the night he came back from the theatre. I feared the shock of that had made him ill, so I would not intrude on him until he felt more himself."

"Well, you know the worst now. And remember, you are still helping him by keeping little Medora. You are doing your share and more than your share in guarding the child for the sake of the woman he loved and lost."

"I shall do that always," she said fervently. Hobhouse took her hand and kissed it.

"There are two of us now to think and pray for him," he said with great emotion. "God grant that all may yet be well."

He left her soon, after promising to call again before Byron's final departure.

Easter Sunday dawned. Augusta rose early and went to church that morning. All the bells were ringing their message of peace and good-will. "The Christ had risen!" Had He risen in the hearts of men and women, she wondered, looking round on those assembled, and wished Byron was beside her. What would these pious people have done—how treated him if he had entered there? The tears started to her eyes and she left the sacred building, saddened, and hurried home.

"If mankind is cruel, God at least is just, and He will help my dear Byron," she thought.

"His Lordship said he would be glad if you could go to him in his own room. He will be up after you have had breakfast," said Fletcher respectfully.

" How is he ? "

The man's eyes filled with tears.

" He don't say much, Mrs. Leigh, but one can see by his looks that he's feeling pretty bad to-day."

It was the last Sunday in the house that had been his home, now broken into fragments around him.

" I should think he would be glad to leave this place," said his sister wistfully.

" He got up and wandered round this morning," said Fletcher. I heard him crying over Miss Ada's cot when I went in. So I came away and left him to himself."

Augusta slowly walked up the stairs towards the room. The house was desolate. The coming sale was evident on all sides. Rooms were partially open, and through the doors were glimpses of furniture placed in order, ready for the coming of strangers.

Most of the servants had left, and to-day the last three were preparing to depart. Only Fletcher would remain with Byron until the last.

During the past few days the drama had been played out to the fall of the curtain. In obedience to the pressing entreaties of the Countess of Jersey, Byron had put in an appearance at the reception given in his honour. The great-hearted lady had some hope that her gracious act might help to restore his lost prestige. She had even invited the Regent. This she had not informed her guest. Had she done so, she might have saved him the crowning insult she was compelled to witness.

Byron appeared—proud, silent, and quietly defiant. As he had anticipated, everyone had made a point of turning their backs on him. Some even left the house when his name was announced. For the sake of his hostess he endured the ordeal of walking by her side down the long ballroom, trying to look unconscious of the deathly silence, the heads turned away, the obvious suspense. But most of the guests waited for the Regent. They would take their lead from him.

He arrived about nine o'clock. The Countess of Jersey, trembling with anxiety, received him and then, as they made their way to the crowded ballroom, she drew his attention to Byron.

" Your Highness," she stammered, " Lord Byron is leaving England for some time. May I beg of you to give him some word of farewell, to wish him God Speed ? "

The Regent turned on her insolently and offered his arm, but he looked Byron full in the face and passed him without a word.

"Your Highness! . . ." she protested.

"Not a word, if you please, Countess! We do not desire to speak to that man, nor do we ever desire to meet him again under your roof. The doors of Carlton House have long been closed to him."

This was the Regent's way. Beau Brummel had been openly rejected, now it was Byron's turn. The First Gentleman of Europe took his revenge in royal style. This insolent poet who had dared to lampoon him, openly allude to his treatment of his wife and daughter! By God! men should see they could not take that course with him! In his mean, ruthless heart he rejoiced at the opportunity of still further crushing the fallen lion.

Byron stood rigid while the guests murmured and laughed as they drew away. He found himself alone and, turning, he slowly limped down the great room, descended the stairs and, receiving his hat and cloak from one of the servants, passed out of the house for ever.

More days of lonely brooding followed. What battles he fought out in the seclusion of his own room no one, not even Augusta, could guess. But she had built on some good result from the reception, and felt bitterly disappointed when she heard of its issue.

She paused outside the door. Why did Byron always stay in the room that had belonged to Isabella and himself? His own room was far more comfortable. She tapped and then peeped inside. Byron was sitting with his back to her, looking at Ada's little cot. He started when Augusta spoke. He looked years older. It was the first time the two had been together for some days. She ran forward and, kneeling beside him, threw her arms round his neck and kissed him tenderly.

"I must come down," he said after a pause. "This room is too cold."

"There's a nice fire in your study, Byron," said she.

The Easter bells were ringing.

"What a noise they are making!" he said in a hard, dry voice. He was trying to be natural. This was their parting, and he was dreading it.

"Easter Sunday, Byron, dear! A good omen for your

journey." Her words were cheerful, but her tears were falling fast.

Neither spoke of what was uppermost in their minds. Of the miserable thought that they must part, that she could not come with him even for a while to comfort him in exile. Nor did they breathe a word of the horrible cloud that had fallen on them both. Byron knew she had been told. He looked down on the sweet, womanly face, and inwardly cursed the lips that had touched her name with infamy. For himself he had ceased to care.

" Byron dear, are you feeling better ? " she asked.

" I'm all right, Goose. There's nothing much wrong with me."

They both rose and stood looking at the little bed.

" Dearest, if you like, I will keep in touch with Belle, and send you all news of little Ada," said Augusta. " Isabella still writes to me."

A sweet look came into Byron's face as she spoke, and he gripped her hand.

" Can you do that for me ? I don't want my Ada to grow up to hate me. I can't lose her," said he.

" There is no losing. You are coming back. I shall try to win Belle back to you, and Ada shall learn to know you through me."

" I never knew how much I loved her," he said sadly.

" Courage, Byron ! This is only for a time. You will come back soon ! "

He did not reply. She led him to the door and they went along the passage to his own room. Fletcher had made it cosy ; tried to shut out all semblance of any moving or going away until the last moment.

Augusta sat down on the sofa and looked round. Her quick eye noted the flowers, the wine and books, and the familiar dressing-gown placed near, as if Byron was to return that night.

" What a blessing Fletcher is to you," she remarked. He nodded and stirred the fire, poked it into a blaze, went to the window and drew the curtains, then lit candles. She watched him in surprise.

" Let's shut out the world as long as we can," said he. " I don't want to remember it a second sooner than is necessary."

She understood. It was like the old days at Newstead. Byron loved warmth and firelight. They would sit together

once more for the last time as they used to do, and talk of old times. The present was too painful, too fraught with disaster. The future all uncertain.

"Goose, Hobby thinks we need not sell Newstead," said he, sitting beside her.

"Oh, Byron, how splendid!"

"Yes. And when I return I shall live there, of course."

"When will you come back? Soon—let it be soon! All this stupid slander will die away." He shot a quick glance at her.

"Will it?" he said, with a break in his voice. "God knows."

"But to keep Newstead . . ."

How Augusta had clung to that hope. It was his one great link with England. All the pride of his race, his ambition, although he had scarcely realized it, was bound up within those ancient walls.

"Belle must relent some day," he said after a silence.

"Could you forgive?" she asked.

"I want to believe that this misery is the doing of others," said he intensely. "Do you know, Hobhouse won't say it is?"

"No; so I gathered."

"If ever I have to believe it is Belle," he broke out, then checked himself. "Oh, it can't be. She's only a girl, after all. Too young to plot infamy. A fool, perhaps; no more."

Augusta looked into the fire.

"Byron," said she, "I want you to promise me something," she began; but he stopped her.

"Not now. Don't try to bind me. I shall live my life in my own way. We can't look forward, and God knows I've tried to look upward. You know that."

"I didn't mean to reproach you."

"I know. You never do. If Belle had chosen she could have altered my life for the best. God! What have they left me? My name blasted, my home shattered, even my fame destroyed! Even your name . . . forgive me! I didn't mean to speak of that."

"Don't think of me. What can I do to help you?" she cried. "Surely, for my sake, you will remember that your life is not your own?"

"You have your faith, Augusta," he answered. "You don't realize what it is to be unable to believe. To want to, and yet reason out the utter impossibility of it all."

"Byron, you can trust God even if man has failed you."

" I seek Him through the human touch, the human voice, the revelation of the heart," he answered. " Looking into the depths of treachery and slander has shown me how false this so-called Christianity can be. Don't ask me to say I believe in charity and truth after what I have suffered these last weeks. Men and women believing the vilest things of me and refusing to speak out to my face, thinking evil of you, and daring to befoul the pure love of a sister for a brother because the slime of their own minds was too thick for them to realize such love is pure. Oh, it's no use ! Let me speak, it does me good ; and you're the only one I can open my heart to now. Augusta, I've tried to pray all these weeks, tried to believe that some miracle must happen to end all this darkness. Well, you see the finish. I couldn't be more desolate than I am at this hour. My life feels shattered. How I shall rebuild it, God alone knows."

He turned away. There were no tears, only a hard, passionate intensity in his utterance. His eyes were blazing with anger. He loathed the traitors who had severed him from all he had known and cared for. He had never needed his sister more than now, yet he dared not think of taking her with him for a time. His one hope of going was that the slander would die down and she, at least, be left in peace.

To his own candid, impulsive nature this attack had been incomprehensible. He was the victim of the crime he most despised—slander. All his life he had waged war on deceit and hypocrisy. When he attacked he did it openly. If he had ever heard anyone reviled, he had made it a point of honour to inform him and had often done so in the presence of the slanderer. He would rather have died than attack in secret. That others could do so to him maddened him.

" Augusta my dear," he said, " I am utterly baffled. When I look back on the past weeks and see the cloud of poison that has spread over me, try to realize that I am slandered by all those whom I thought my friends, I feel bewildered. If I could see clear for one hour, understand how these lies originated, who started them, who spread them, I should be more at peace. It is the uncertainty, the terrible dread of a repetition of it some day, that unnerves me." He paused, and a look of terror came into his blue eyes.

" *Supposing this hatred pursues me to the end ?* " he said in a low voice—" *even in the grave . . . beyond that . . . to Eternity !* "

"Byron, don't think of that!" cried Augusta. "Dearest, you are going away from England on a blessed day. But it is only for a time. Give me a promise! Come back home on Easter Sunday! Soon . . . soon! Mr. Hobhouse and I will be waiting to welcome you!"

"Hobby has been wonderful," said Byron. "It will be a hard pull to say good-bye to him."

"But you will see him again?"

"He is coming to see me off. I can't look forward further than that. No further than the sea-shore."

At that moment they both had a vision of the sea at Hastings and looked at one another. But neither said a word. They knew the thoughts that passed through the minds of each.

"You haven't promised to come home on Easter Sunday!" said she, trying to brighten the parting.

"*Well, then, I promise,*" he answered with a sad smile.

The clock was striking the hour. They had been together all day, but it had seemed a very short time. Augusta must go and leave him to make his preparations for the journey. The house would be empty after his departure.

A knock at the door.

"Come in," said Byron, releasing Augusta and speaking in a matter-of-fact way. Now, in spite of the fire, the room felt cold. Fletcher had come to announce Mrs. Leigh's carriage.

"All right, Fletcher, thank you," said Byron; then with an attempt to speak lightly, "I'll see you downstairs, Goose." But at the last moment he held her. There was something else he wanted to say and had been struggling to say all the time.

"Always tell me, if you see . . . Mary," he whispered.

"Of course. I shall go to Annesley to see her. I'll send you all news of her and Medora."

"Somehow I often forget Medora is Mary's child. That time is like a dream. It was all trouble, and I know nothing except that Mary was . . . ill. No, tell me about Mary. That's all."

She promised, and kissed him once more before they went down to the waiting carriage. In a few minutes she was gone.

"He will come back. We shall meet again," she kept saying to herself as she was driven away from the brother she loved.

Byron made his way up to the room again, and looking round

shivered. It was lonely and cold. The house seemed like a tomb. It was the grave of buried hopes. Ada had been the bright star of the future. Would he ever see her again ? He could not think beyond the present, and Ada was far away.

It was night when Fletcher came to announce the carriage and attend while his master put on his cloak. Byron took it mechanically and yet waited.

" I'll come down in a moment, Fletcher," he said. The man understood and withdrew.

One swift wave of reaction passed over Byron. He gave a glance of desperate pain round the room. He longed to hear the sound of a baby's cry. Ada's little hands were pulling him back. But the horses were pawing the ground outside. He limped down the stairs and to the door, Fletcher following. People were passing and glanced curiously at the house. Some stood and watched him as he descended the steps. The moon had risen, and those who saw him told others of a sad, proud, finely chiselled face that looked like a Greek mask in the pale light.

The carriage drove away through the town, on into the country, and he journeyed on towards the sea.

Thus the Eternal Pilgrimage commenced.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

VENICE is a city of the sea. A city of love and mystery, rising out of the water like a dream. It seems to have suddenly appeared, and will, perhaps, disappear with the coming of day, leaving merely an expanse of water and a dome of sky.

The sun makes spangles on the water of the Grand Canal. In the smaller canals it is green and still, overshadowed by the tall houses, but in the greater waterway it is blue and fresh, flowing freely from the Adriatic Sea, a short distance across the Lagoon that divides Venice from Lido.

Shawls and rugs hang from balconies, casting pretty reflections in the water, doors and shutters are painted in gentle colours, somewhat faded from want of renovation in the poorer quarters, but elegant in the richer ; dull greens and russets, like autumn leaves, sometimes a bright sun blind jutting out from a window, yellow or blue or red and white. Shrubs growing on the roof gardens add a note of freshness to the romantic scene. Venice is like a worn beauty dressing herself to look attractive and, being an artiste, fits her choice of colours to her complexion. She is none of your highly tinted hussies, she wears no rouge, but favours a creamy pallor and bright red lips. Her greens and browns blend with her copper hair, and her smile is wicked. The fashioning of her houses is unique. Her palaces are like those of a fairy tale, where characters in the romance live. Venice is the romance and her makers are the characters in her story. She has a voice, and sings wonderful melodies. She is always striving towards Holiness and always falling before Temptation, until she knows not which she follows most.

She is for ever merging into a swirl of colour, soft shades that steal over her waters at all times ; in the morning, a pearl ; in the afternoon, a flaming opal ; in the evening, a sapphire ; in the night, a dream of all these, mingled with diamond stars. She had been a queen, and was now a regal wanton, holding her court in its faded splendour, with no care for morality or honour, yet holding up her head to the last, and

determined to take all she could get in the way of souls. A siren to be feared. Yet, how dainty she can be on a spring morning at six o'clock, with the church bells ringing in all directions on the cool sea breeze. When the mists are rising from the ground and flocks of birds are circling round the great Piazza St. Marco, you would think Venice a positive saint.

To this city of the sea came Byron, after many changes.

One thing remained the same in his establishment, and formed the only direct link with English thought and ways, namely, William Fletcher, who had never changed under any circumstances whatsoever. He may have developed somewhat, but not perceptibly. One of the effects of his development was a habit of cursing foreigners pretty freely. He had good reason. The wonder was that he endured the life, that he did not give up his post in despair, and depart for England. But something in his bulldog nature made him cling to his master. He had gathered great hopes when they came to Venice. This would be better than Switzerland, where they had spent some dreary months living a quiet, rather solitary life, relieved only by some, to Fletcher, extraordinary neighbours named Shelley. His Lordship had been very good friends with the gentleman, who was presumably mad, and nearly succeeded in turning his Lordship into the same state. Apart from this, Switzerland had been lonely. There was no company, no social life, nothing to make up for the whirl of London. Byron had seemed stunned. He displayed no emotions and no great interest in existence, except for an intense hatred of any Englishmen who happened to cross his path. He poured out some amazing work, and London was electrified by the publication of another canto of "Childe Harold," deep, grand, seared with sorrow. Then a poem, which he called "The Dream," told those who had eyes to see the story of Mary. John Musters was one who recognized the tale, and promptly cut down the trees on Diadem Hill, while his wife wept in secret. After this came a strange, fierce thing, "Manfred." And here again was Mary, mad, destroyed while loved. Having written these, the ice was broken, and Byron threw off his cloak of deadly calm.

"Manfred" caused a sensation. The public began to stir, to call aloud for Byron's return, to lament his harsh treatment. And then the secret slanders once more buzzed in the ears of London. At once the papers denounced the drama. It was

impious, a revelation of Byron's true evil nature, etc. Mr. Murray, in all honesty, sent out the reviews which Byron tore to pieces and laughed aloud.

Soon Switzerland was left behind for warmer climes, and after a brief visit to Rome, Byron reached Venice, with the faithful Fletcher in his wake. Here, the good man saw more chance of a good time. His Lordship found company. Found it so quickly that before he had been staying in his apartments very long, the landlord's wife had installed herself as Byron's mistress. Apart from this, there was much going out to the salons of Countess Benzoni and her rival, Madame Albrezzi, who fought for the honour of receiving the great English poet. But the Venetian salons did not interest Byron much. There were too many English visitors for his mood. He soon gave up going to the receptions, and took up his abode in a palace of his own, on the Grand Canal. This pleased Fletcher, who thought that his master should live "in style." And so he did. Having dismissed the vulgar mistress, there seemed some chance of happiness, thought Fletcher. But later on a cloud fell on his hopes.

Letters had arrived from England, and all at once Byron became strangely altered. How or why, Fletcher could not tell, but there were even less goings out to the great salons, less mixing in high Venetian Society, more brooding in rooms alone, more furious outbursts of temper for nothing at all, and more inclination to smooth the ruffled nerves with wine. It all came out on one particular night when Byron had partaken somewhat freely of the national drink.

"Fletcher," said he, savagely tearing up something he had written, and throwing it into the water below his window, "It's over!"

"I beg pardon, my Lord?" said Fletcher inquiringly.

"Over . . . do you hear? Finished," was the information he received.

"I'm sorry, my Lord, but I don't quite understand."

"No. Naturally." Byron gazed out of the window and bit his lips. Then he turned suddenly and threw himself into a chair.

"Newstead's gone, at last!" said he.

"Sold, my Lord?" Fletcher's voice betrayed more emotion than he cared to admit. Byron nodded.

"Sold! Gone! Passed out of my life . . . with Ada!"

Fletcher started violently, shaken out of his usual calm.

" Miss Ada's not dead, my Lord ? " he cried in alarm, darting forward as if he wanted to take Byron in his arms.

" Dead to me. They've put her in Chancery, damn them ! Do you know what that means ? Clermont's got her . . . the Milbankes have got her ! Got her for life ! Everything's finished ! "

And from that time onwards Fletcher had to accustom himself to a different master, and watch the gradual change that took place in the making of him. It came slowly, but with a dreadful certainty.

The Mocenigo Palace changed, too. There were riotous dinner parties, there were occasionally violent quarrels between excited women as to who had the right to remain as honoured guest, which generally resulted in all being turned out, and told to take themselves to the nethermost regions.

The palace had a fair share of Venetian scandal. Byron began to make a decided sensation, but not quite the same sort as he had done hitherto.

One evening when the sky was deepening to indigo, and all was more or less quiet outside, save for the soft plash of water, Fletcher came into the great salon of the palace with candles, which he set down. Seeing his master sitting by the open window, and looking out with curiously wistful eyes that had the ghost of a smile in them, and on his lips also, Fletcher ventured to put a question :

" Will you dine, to-night, my Lord ? "

Byron started.

" No ! But I'm going out," and he gave orders that a particular suit of clothes should be laid in readiness.

Going to his dressing-room, with Fletcher in attendance, he prepared to make his toilet silently and very carefully. As Fletcher was fastening his foot straps under his boot, he looked down, and smiled outright. It was good to see.

" I've been thinking, Fletcher. Have you ? " he asked.

Fletcher paused and hesitated in his task.

" I do a deal of thinking at times, my Lord," said he.

" Yes, I dare say you do. What were you thinking of just now ? "

Fletcher rose, and took the coat from where it lay.

" Well my Lord, I was thinking of that night you went to Holland House, when his Royal Highness was there, and all the great ladies and gentlemen was present. I think it was to celebrate Waterloo, my Lord."

" Yes ! It was ! I was thinking of it, too."

" I know why, my Lord ! It was the first time you wore this coat. That's what set me looking back. You haven't worn it since, if I remember aright, my Lord. You took a fancy to grey lately."

" Yes ! It suited my prospects. It was a wonderful night, Fletcher ! "

" I believe you, my Lord ; I'm sure it must have been. The splendour of the ballroom must have been very grand to see. I recollect you brought a rose out of Lady Holland's bouquet, and gave it to Mrs. Fletcher. She was very proud of it, my Lord. She's got it pressed in her Bible, as much for your touch, as for where it come from, my Lord."

Byron smiled again, but sadly. He looked at himself in the mirror. He appeared much the same as he had done on that night.

" I remember Lady Holland, Fletcher, in a wonderful amber gown, carrying those red roses. Everyone carried them - for England. Lady Jersey was in white, with sapphires and rubies at her neck and on her glorious black hair, and she, too, had red roses in her hand. Such a brilliant crowd ! The backbone of the country. The matchless women and the peerless men."

Fletcher had not had an opportunity to talk with his master freely of late. It was a happy moment. He put the room to rights, quietly, while they conversed.

" Can you recall, my Lord, when that ball was given at Holland House, when his Grace the Duke of Wellington was there ? I remember you told me they made a rare fuss of him. Half London turned out to cheer him on his way."

" Are you thinking of that, too ? It came to me strongly. Was it in the November ? "

" It was December, my Lord. The night before . . ." he hesitated—" before Miss Ada was born."

" Yes ! The night before Ada was born. Yes, you're quite right."

Byron sat down before the mirror, and looked into it for a long time. Then he began speaking softly, almost as if he was talking to himself.

" Holland House, with the great garden. Such a charming garden, often filled with fair women and noble men. A world of intellect and dignity. The Jerseys, too—Berkeley Square. The long rows of carriages at night. The lights in the window.

Those sparkling crystal chandeliers. There's a splendid example of crystal work in Boodle's Club, by the way. I wonder who lives at No. 8, St. James's Street, now? I liked No. 8. So near everywhere—so close to Murray and everybody. I must write to Murray. I suppose Drury Lane is still in a turmoil and the committee fighting over Kean. I wonder if he still gets drunk? Poor old Kean! He really couldn't keep sober for a week if he tried. Don't blame him, either! There was only one night when I felt really proud of myself. It was an awful ordeal. It was shortly after 'Childe Harold' had come out, when they sold the first edition in a day. I went to the theatre; some night when everyone of any importance was present, and, led by some of the greatest in the land, the house rose, and cheered me as I entered my box. It was painful! Joyous pain! Next day I was covered with flowers and besieged by visitors. That moment, when I realized I was a famous man was extraordinary. I remember that Hobhouse said it was worthy of the theatre; like a scene in a play. I know I became an actor from that time, and life has been one long drama since. God knows I have felt my part and suffered in it. It seems to have entertained the world a little. Life is the queerest of comedies. One must learn to laugh at it in the true spirit."

He sat very quiet for some time after this, and Fletcher wondered why he stared into the glass so steadily. The silence became intolerable. Fletcher did not like to break in with a word, but he could feel a strange air in the room. Venice in the twilight is sometimes uncanny.

At last, Byron rose. His face was placid, expressionless.

"My cloak, please," he said.

"Yes, my Lord! The black?"

"No; purple with the rose lining."

Fletcher brought it forth, and placed it.

"I'll have the gold-mounted stick—the 'coronet.'"

It was produced and given.

"I expect I shall be late, Fletcher. You need not wait. I'll put myself to bed."

"Thank you, my Lord."

"Leave some wine in the library, just in case Mr. Hobhouse or anyone comes along with me. It is very likely he will be there. He never trusts me to come home alone, if he can help it. What it is to have a bad character, Fletcher!"

Fletcher looked puzzled, but grinned at the remark.

" I suppose I'd better go," continued Byron calmly. " They're a damned nuisance, when armchairs and books are more to one's fancy. No letters, are there ? "

" None, my Lord."

" I don't expect anyone to call."

Fletcher could not bear it any longer. He dropped a hint :

" In case anything important should occur, my Lord, may I know where to find you ? " he asked.

Byron tossed his head, with that old impatient movement.

" You know perfectly well. Holland . . ."

A gondola swished against the poles outside. The wavelets lapped the steps, and the bell of St. Mark's struck seven.

Byron's eyes grew wide. He put his hand to his throat, and then to his forehead, and breathed hard. He was trembling, and could not speak for a few minutes.

With a sudden awakening, he threw off his cloak.

" I won't go out," said he. " Give me a dressing-gown. I'll write some letters. Bring something to drink. Brandy ! It's damned cold to-night ! Don't come bothering me about food ; I'm not hungry. You retire early, for a change. Do you good ! "

Fletcher, trembling also, did as he was bid.

" Nothing more, my Lord ? "

" No, nothing more ! "

" Good night, my Lord."

" Good night, Fletcher."

He went out, having looked to the lights, and Byron sat down to write letters, in a rapid, feverish hand.

The weeks went by, and life in Venice went on its usual round. It is an inclosed place, cut off from the world. England seemed as far away as the moon, and few letters came from friends there. Byron wrote to everyone freely, but they did not appear to bother to reply. He grew more irritable every day. He had not written much poetry since the great outburst in Switzerland, and his active brain was restless. The wrongs he had sustained turned him bitter. But bitterness was contrary to his nature, and he hated himself for it. He set about getting into a state of mind that saw things in a humorous light, and eased his heart by writing a satire. This was all very amusing when the wine was in his head and he cared for nothing. But sometimes he awoke in the night sober and serious, to hear the solemn stroke of midnight and

peal of bells that rings out over Venice, and knew that he was caring very much.

Byron lay awake one night in his great canopied bed, and fixed his eyes upon a star. The stars always seemed to understand and twinkle kindly. Augusta had written that day, and set him thinking. In her letter was news that she had seen Mary Musters. This is what made Byron lie awake. Mary was not well. She had occasional fits of madness, and her husband was behaving as badly as ever. Augusta gave this news simply, as a duty. Byron had asked to tell him everything. She had sent some early primroses from the hills at Annesley.

" You would, perhaps, like to think of the sweet country as it is now. The hedges are sprinkled with green and the air is fresh and sharp. When are you coming back to see it ? It looks so pretty. I wish we could be together, at . . . I had nearly said Newstead. My dear, I must not give you pain. And yet, it is good to write freely. I hope you are well and taking care of yourself or that Fletcher is taking care of you. Mr. Hobhouse pleased me greatly by saying that Switzerland had quite restored your health. By the wonderful works you produced there, I should say it had. You will write more, and make yourself so famous that England will welcome you tenfold when you return. I am glad, dearest Byron. Please write and tell me that you are in the best of spirits."

A vision of Newstead had come with this letter.

It was not so long, after all, that Byron had lain in a different canopied bed. A plain, homely one for all its coroneted posts, hung with fresh green and white chintz. The whole room springlike and very English. Simple furniture, a few fine prints of Cambridge on the walls, a big bow window, looking out on the quaint old fountain and expanse of grass, tall trees, and the rushing sound of a waterfall, somewhere invisible. So gentle, with such a quiet dignity. Just as still as this vast Venetian palace, but so different.

He lay, on the warm still night, thinking of his room at Newstead. How often had he gazed upon a star from that window, and thought of Mary ! Now, he did the same. Strange, how things come back ! Mary ! Mary ! Mary ! The word beat into his brain until he could not stop it. It tormented him. He rolled over and tried to shut out the star.

"You must forget," he said to himself. "Do you hear? You're going to forget! You're going to live now! Put the past behind you!"

Yet, why did everything come back to him? Why did he begin thinking of what had led up to his marriage? Why did Isabella pester him in the quiet hours? Why did he remember things so vividly?

He rose, and threw a gown upon him, then sat at the table looking over his papers, and writing some lines of his latest work, "Don Juan." It was the only way to distract himself. Most of it had been written in the night, while the brain was still excited. Stowed away in his subconscious mind were the formations of earlier poems—"The Corsair," "The Bride of Abydos," "Lara," and "The Giaour"—all written at a time when he was racked with anxiety about Mary, then in the house at Hastings awaiting the birth of her child. These seemed to return in a revolving cycle, and found their way into this extraordinary effusion. It was vigorous enough, but in the light of his former glory it was a disgrace. His sense of rhyme, the mode of expression, the whole construction, was enough to make his friends weep. He never realized it. He scarcely realized the shocking change in himself. To-night the verse would not flow easily. He threw down the pen, and, going to his dressing-table, lit a lamp there, and sank into the chair before it.

The reflection in the mirror interested him.

"Good Lord!" said he. "What would Augusta say if she saw this?"

He looked again, and studied himself. His head was a mass of tangled curls, uneven and straggling over his neck. They were silver, for the most part, with here and there a glint of that bright auburn which used to crown his magic pallor. He was still pale, but his face was not so refined and ethereal as it had been hitherto. There was a relaxation in his expression that did not suggest a sober life, and a difference in contour. His eyes had deepened to a slate grey and round them unmistakable signs of dissipation. His mouth drooped at the corners, a slight line was coming between nostril and lip. There was an air of defiant ruination about him. For a moment he was startled. He did not often bother to notice his appearance. He wondered what Hobhouse would think if he saw him. The Byron of Venice was by no means the Byron of London. He took up the comb and ran it through

his hair, making it ripple slowly. Presently he rose and, sighing deeply, went to the window and looked out.

The Grand Canal was still, just lapping very softly, lap, lap, against the steps below.

"I wonder what England would say if I fell in?" he mused. "It might amuse a few of my friends, and save a deal of thinking." The water drew him. He turned away from it, with a toss of his head, and swore at himself.

"Don't be a fool!" he cried. "You're going to live. You haven't had half enough out of life yet! Don't drown like a dog, and give them all the laugh of you! You must show them something better than that."

One of his friends had been drowned, in the Cam, years ago. It had given him a shock at the time; he knew how it felt to know a life one loved had perished in the weeds. He thought of Hobhouse. He might be sorry, and Augusta would grieve. Yet why should she? He was as good as dead to anyone in England. He saw the primroses lying on the table. They had come from Annesley. He kissed them, and let them drop out of the window, to float down the stream. His tears were hot and salt. He forced them back.

"You've got to laugh, my son! Don't let anyone know you can cry. You're not going to be crushed and beaten. Tears are foolish. Don't think of death, either. You're living, and don't forget it. Write to all your friends, and tell them how tremendously you're living."

Somewhere on the air, from a house near by, came the sound of a baby crying. Its voice broke the silence curiously like the cry of all the sad babies in the world, wanting their fathers, and snatched from them. It was echoed by another cry from within the Mocenigo palace.

"Ada! they've parted us, I know. Don't cry like that! You must not let them know you care. Laugh, as I shall, my girl, as I do when I cease to think."

He stopped himself, abruptly. There was a moment of deathly silence in the room.

"I must not think any more. I must kill it—kill memory quickly!"

He had not taken laudanum for some time. Brandy was satisfactory enough, but it did not obliterate the past, it sometimes made it clearer.

"Fool! you know you can do it! There's no reason why you shouldn't. Who can stop you now, and why should they give themselves the trouble?"

He suddenly longed for it, and searched for some minutes in drawers and pockets. There was none to be had until day. But he must drink something to get through the night, so he took a lamp, and got some brandy from the room beyond. It was comforting. The air was cold. The spirit warmed him as he drank it, thankfully, plentifully.

In the pocket of his gown he found a letter from Mr. Murray, enclosing cuttings from the London newspapers. He reread them, and laughed. "Manfred" had caused a mighty stir. He wondered what "Don Juan" would do. That was the kind of thing to show them he cared for nothing. Isabella would find herself delightfully mentioned. Hobhouse would probably hold up his hands in horror.

Pistols were lying on the table. He found his fingers curling round one, and rose quickly, retreating from them as far as he could against the bed-post.

The baby in the house near by cried again.

"No! No! Don't let them say you've given in! You're going to live . . . live! They shall know you go on and on. To hell with public opinion or private either!"

He got through the night, more or less easily, by writing, interesting himself in the composition, taking no heed of plot or plan. He let his feelings have full play. He laughed as he wove the mixture; bitterness and derision that would, no doubt, set everyone by the ears.

The dawn broke, pearly and peaceful, and Byron's sleepless eyes watched it spread over the water. He moved from the table to look at the sky becoming pink and warm. For some time he stood, leaning against the pillars of the casement, wondering if Ada would ever know his history.

"Perhaps it's best as it is," he thought. "I wonder if she will ever read my writings. She'll have a damned bad opinion of me if she reads 'Juan.'"

Another moment of gazing at the rosy clouds, and he cursed himself for thinking of Ada.

"I want to forget, if only for a day, a night, a week, a year!" he sobbed, rocking himself, with his head buried in his arms against the wall. "I can't bear the torture any longer. I don't want to think of Belle or Ada. I don't want to think of Mary or Annesley, roses and Medora . . . Augusta . . . Newstead. . . . Just for a time, a space! I don't know how it will end, but the respite! God! Can I never have any rest?"

His tears came into his throat, salt and stifling, and he wept so violently that he was shaken through and through. He sank down on a seat before the window, trembling in every limb. When he had recovered a little, he wrote again, some disconnected, rambling scraps of verse, until Fletcher came in about nine o'clock.

" Good morning, my Lord. Haven't you slept well ? " said Fletcher, seeing at once that his Lordship had passed a bad night.

" Couldn't sleep. Have I got any laudanum, Fletcher ? "

Fletcher started, and a pained expression crossed his face.

" Er . . . not that I know of, my Lord," said he.

Byron bit his quill nervously.

" I want some ! Send for it, now ! Don't delay. I want it now."

Fletcher looked at him.

" Are you sure it will do you good, my Lord ? " he ventured.

" I know it will drug my brain, and that's all I care. I've lost my sense of humour. If I sleep for a day perhaps it will return. I must get it back at all costs." He smiled at his watchdog, and told him to cheer up.

" All right, Fletcher ! Don't worry yourself. I shall be more good humoured when my nerves are calmer. I'm not going to commit suicide. Far from it. I'm going to keep myself alive. Go along, now, and get what I want ! "

Fletcher obeyed, sent a messenger to the chemist, and procured the longed-for drug. He entered Byron's room, and found him tapping impatiently with his fingers on the table. He laid the phial before him, and stood waiting for orders.

" Put a little brandy in that glass. I'm so damnably shaky. Now ! a few drops into it. That's enough for the moment ! "

Fletcher, with his heart aching, performed this task as though he were waiting at table, and merely pouring out wine. He offered the glass to his master. The heartache died in the fulfilment of a desire from that being whom he worshipped.

" There, my Lord ! I hope that will do you good," said he with such sympathy and gentle concern that Byron grasped his hand while he drank the potion.

" I'm sure it will," said he. " It shall ! I won't have any nonsense about it ! "

" Shall I stay, my Lord ? Are you going to dress, or will you lie down and try to get some sleep ? " asked Fletcher.

"No! Not yet. I'll dress, if I'm awake, in time to go out to-night. I may sleep. I expect so. We'll see."

As soon as Fletcher's back was turned he took a little more laudanum.

"Thank God for that!" he said, throwing himself on the bed.

And the last thing he heard as he floated away was the baby crying.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE consternation that appeared to be going forward over Byron's works in England kept the devil alive in him. He rejoiced he was having his revenge on his dear friends in London who had showered roses on him and then hurled stones. Hobhouse was in despair, and wrote in an endeavour to stem the flood of bitter satire that flowed from Byron's pen, and commented on the reckless doings that made up the news of his letters. But Byron laughed and replied that he was going to wear himself to the last thread, if he chose. It was a wild pose, at first, to shock his friends. He didn't even realize that it was the truth. The grip of Venice was growing strong, and stealing his senses more than he knew. He fancied himself as strong and dominant as ever. It was mainly obstinacy that kept the fighting spirit uppermost in him. He imagined he was free, and justified in doing exactly what his nature demanded.

He never thought of the great things of life by the time the year 1818 was well advanced. He lived for the moment, and the more sensational the moment, the better he liked it. His appearance was noticed by those who knew him, and there was much talk in Venice as to the shocking life Lord Byron was leading in his extravagant palace. He was no longer the ethereal ideal poet, fragile and mystic, aloof from mortals of earthly mind, but a flamboyant, dissipated man of the world, remarkably handsome, but undoubtedly on the way to hell. He looked just as disreputable as he said he was, and it pleased him. He liked truth above all things. He was happy to find that nature was truthful also. She was a cruel realist. Her paintings did not spare any details. Fletcher was somewhat disturbed in mind on account of a marked tendency to carelessness in dress. Although Byron wore very fine clothes and showed a leaning towards the startling, he took no interest in his looks, and said he had done with vanity. But Nature had her little joke at his expense in this. In Venice, as in London, Byron was the most talked-of man in town, and

simply because his beauty could never be dimmed, even if it was damaged.

He was surprised one afternoon to receive a visit from a personage he did not know. If the name had been English he would have refused to see him. But the name was Count Gamba, and so, in a few minutes he was confronted with a tall, very good-looking and very young Italian in military uniform, who bowed ceremoniously, and explained himself.

"Lord Byron," said he, "you will be wondering why I should burst in on you in this manner. The Countess Bensoni must be held responsible as much as my own desire to make your acquaintance. She sends a message to say that she thinks you a wicked man to so neglect her. Those were her very words."

His bright young smile warmed Byron's heart to see, and he smiled in response.

He immediately took a fancy to this fine, healthy young man, but he could see that Count Gamba's eyes were critical. The severe, neat uniform and brown skin of the boy were in very great contrast to Byron's exotic dressing-gown and pale face, out of which shone strangely bright eyes that seemed sleepy yet sleepless.

"So the Countess Bensoni has put me on her black books, has she?" said he. "Well, it's true I have ignored all her kind invitations to mingle with the society of her salon. I've been too busy entertaining on my own account. And I have no love of chattering women . . . at least not those that frequent the Bensoni's dinner parties. However, don't tell her this! I am glad she sent so commendable a messenger. Why do you stand, Count Gamba? Pray be seated, and take a glass of wine; also tell me why you had a desire to know me. I like to find out why people visit me. I think you'll tell the truth."

Gamba seated himself. But he was not at all sure that he understood this peculiar man who treated him as if he had known him for years. The young Count was used to great formality. He was not easy in the presence of one who had not dressed for the day, although it was four o'clock, and who spoke in a careless tone as if quite ignoring the fact that he was receiving a member of the Italian aristocracy. The English were a queer race, anyway.

"I cannot say that I exactly understand you. But, believe me, I have long wished to know you on account of my sister's

great love for your works. She reads them so often that she can say most of them by heart, and makes such a hero of you, that I, naturally, on hearing that you were in Venice, sought a pretext by which I could call upon you. My friend, the good Countess Bensoni, gave me my chance, and here you see me."

"And very gladly, Count Gamba, I assure you," said Byron.

"I want to ask you also, what are your views on the rebellion? We . . . I mean my family . . . are hot upon it."

"Mind you don't burn yourself, then, and look out for trouble. I must confess I take little interest in fighting at the moment. What? With the Carnival looming, and all Venice preparing to make love?"

Gamba drew himself up and frowned.

"I do not agree with Carnival! It is demoralizing the country, and causing more trouble than twenty rebellions. One will be enough to wipe out some of the tyranny that chains the people of Italy."

"It would be rather amusing, certainly, and make a little change in this dull life. But let us talk of more pleasant subjects. How is it that we have not met before in this very small circle?"

"Our home is in Ravenna. But my sister will come to Venice when she is married, and I shall stay for a time with her and the Count Guiccioli. Madame Bensoni is our very dear friend, and her advice to Teresa is invaluable. She has been almost a mother to us."

"Your sister is going to marry. I hope she will be happy," said Byron. "If there can be any happiness in marriage."

"I could have wished to see her married to a man more of her own age. But she was promised to the Count some years ago. My father insists. There is nothing more to be said."

The note of reserve in Gamba's voice warned Byron not to question him too particularly about his sister's marriage.

"I have a sister in England," said he. "I can understand your feelings in the matter. We always want to see the women happy, don't we? And more often than not we see them . . . no, you won't understand these things. Don't marry yourself, that's my advice to you! Forgive me, Count Gamba, I fear I speak in riddles. For which, blame late hours and the climate of Venice!"

"I will not add to your distraction, then," said Gamba, rising. He found it difficult to talk to Byron, and came to the

conclusion that he was not at all worthy of Teresa's worship. He was obviously wasting his time and brains, and Gamba did not believe in wasting either. He took his leave impressed with the fact that the scandals about Lord Byron, current in Venice, were not without foundation.

The visit set Byron thinking. Gamba had interested him, and he wished they could have met under different conditions. The sister did not absorb his attention. She was no doubt one of the usual kind, willing to be sold to the first old noble who cared to pay a good price to her family.

"I prefer harlots," said Byron. "They are at least honest and have no pretence as to their sale. These innocent young convent girls are no better, but they talk of position and respectability, while they agree to be sold like cattle."

He had grown cynical. He was lonely. Letters remained unanswered, when he wrote to Hobhouse and Murray, no one cared for his existence. He wrote to all his friends, and asked them to reply, but weeks passed without their taking the slightest notice. He was furious with them, and told them so. He did not wish to mix with the society of the city, although the hostesses clamoured for him. His only intimate friends were the British Consul and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Hoppner. He rubbed shoulders with a great many people at the opera and elsewhere, but he always felt isolated. He knew why and would not admit it. He knew perfectly well that he was drifting down. His associates were of a class not familiar with the great palaces. The dancers and actresses knew him well. He was at home in the houses of the courtesans, but the drawing-rooms knew him not. He persistently refused to visit them. Yet it was often lonely. The Italians were entertaining, cheerful, delightful companions; but he missed Hobhouse, the Hollands, and all the truly magnificent brains that England, with all her faults, produced, and among which his former life had been passed.

He did not write so clearly. He wrote incessantly, but the matter was poor in comparison with his usual work. The hand was almost illegible.

His brain was suffering from the life into which he had fallen, and was falling more and more every day. The time for Carnival had nearly arrived. This season was responsible for much excitement in Venice still, although the people had lost something of the romance that had distinguished the Festa of sixty years ago. Byron entered into the spirit of Carnival

with all the recklessness of a former age. Nothing mattered. Scathing paragraphs from London papers sent by some unknown person and marked with red ink made no impression whatever. He was still slandered, still beaten, still attacked. But he had succeeded in drugging it out of existence and gave himself up to pleasure completely. He was often at the opera, always at festas accompanied by ladies of flashing appearance but doubtful character, he was known to have several mistresses, who quarrelled with him, and whom he was for ever turning out of the house. He was out every night till the small hours, and Fletcher rarely saw him in a perfectly sober state.

It was but a few days to Carnival, and the city was decking its windows and balconies with flags and banners, the boats hanging lamps on their prows and wreaths of leaves and flowers on their sides. Byron was returning from some favourite's house about five o'clock in the morning, when he beheld, sitting on the doorstep of a house in a narrow street, a young girl crying bitterly. She was dressed poorly, like a worker, but her garments had an air of attempted attraction and her thin face was painted. She wore a flower in her dark hair and a string of gaudy beads hung round her neck. He would have passed her had not the dejected and pitiful attitude and sobs drawn him to stop and speak to her. Byron could not bear to see a woman in tears without trying to help her. He was in a good temper, not always the case when he had taken much wine, and feeling particularly at peace with the world as presented by the quiet, beautiful, mysterious calm of a dawn in Venice, he wished to share his content with the distressed maiden. So, pausing before her, with one hand against the doorpost, he asked her what was wrong.

She looked up and started, as though expecting punishment, but seeing a gentleman when she had evidently feared a policeman, she frowned and drew her shawl about her, trying to hide her tears.

"What's the matter, cara?" he asked. "Locked out?"

"Nothing! Leave me alone!" she replied.

"Now, don't look me in the face, crying, shivering and starting like a frightened hare, and say there's nothing the matter," said he, beckoning her to rise.

She shook her head, saying that she was better left alone.

"Come and have some wine with me, will you? You're cold," he insisted.

"Oh, No! No!" she shrank back, and started crying again.

"You're not frightened of me, are you?" he asked.

"You're the worse for drink. I can't help being afraid," said she.

"My dear child, I won't hurt you! I want to help you." The kindly smile and gentle, drowsy tone of the musical voice now, unhappily less clear than formerly, but nevertheless very arresting, reassured her, and she became quieter, while she dried her eyes on the corner of her shawl.

"I cannot tell you my trouble. It is good of you to ask, but I am beyond help. I shall drown myself soon. That is the best way."

"Are you ill?"

"In a day or two, Signor, I shall be a mother! I have nowhere to go. I must die in the street. No! No! The water is always near! The shame of it!"

She wept, and grew desperate, struggling to her feet, and stood, a picture of misery leaning against the door.

Byron removed his cloak, and made her put it on, then placing his left arm round her, he told her not to fear, and took her towards the back entrance of the palace.

"We are a little distance, but I hope you won't suffer," said he.

She clung to him now. There was that in his warm-hearted manner that inspired her with confidence.

His good nature had been uppermost all night, and he was always affectionate where women were concerned. Deprived of the means to lavish affection on wife or sister, he gave all his inborn love to anyone that made a demand on it.

"This is very good of you, Signor," said she.

"Don't talk until you've had some wine. You must go to bed and rest, cara mia," he answered.

Having entered the palace, and taken her to his room, he placed her in a deep chair, and made her drink a good glass of wine.

"You are very good; but I must not stay here," said she. I must drown myself before my child can be born. I have been cruelly abandoned by him who was my lover. My child will now be born so soon. What shall I do? No home! No honour!"

"You shall not be homeless, little one," said he.

"You must not harbour such as me here!" sobbed the girl.

" I have had worse than you, my dear. You're going to have a child. Do you think I can let you go, knowing that ? "

" Have you children of your own, Signor ? " she asked.

" I have children that should be my own, but . . . fate denies them to me."

" And you love them ? "

" I scarcely know, now. Life is such a whirl. I know nothing, neither do I wish to ! "

He summoned Tita, his gondolier, and asked him if he had a wife. Tita grinned, and admitted that he had not, at present, but hoped to have in the near future.

" Do you know anyone who has ? " asked Byron.

" My friend Guiseppe has a wife," replied the gigantic oarsman, who worshipped his master like a great dog.

" Well, tell the wife of Guiseppe that she must look after a young woman about to bear a child. A bedroom must be prepared for her at once, and let no one gossip. She must have every attention. Do you understand ? "

Tita nodded, and set about making the necessary plans for receiving the unfortunate girl, whom Guiseppe's wife took under her wing in an upper chamber of the palace.

" Come and see me when you are better," said Byron. " I hope the Gods will be kind."

She kissed his hand, and could not speak, but just looked up at him in gratitude.

Something in her face, an expression or a feature, reminded him of someone. He started and turned white. It was a memory that had lain dormant and now sprang into life.

" Why do I always meet people who bring back the past ? Why am I for ever haunted ? " he wondered.

He went to his room, and unearthed old letters that spoke of other days. The few letters that had not been stolen.

" Don't be a fool ! Why do you read them ? " he said, and burnt them.

The awakened memory of Mary tormented him all day until he drank it into oblivion.

The Carnival commenced in all the riot of its mad frolic. For three weeks there would be merriment and freedom from care in the city. Each night became more exciting than the first, and the people kept up the revels in a set determination to make as much noise and play as many tricks as possible. Every house was open, and invaded by troupes of masked fools dressed in every sort of garb. Byron's palace became a wild

haunt of gambling and drinking, where vulgar women and rowdy fought over losses and gains, and the shrieking, drunken women lay about in scanty garments, or danced madly to the strumming of guitars.

A few days of this reduced Byron to a state of mind which made him powerless to lift himself out of the vortex. As this mode of life was progressing, the girl he had rescued was, in the far corner of the palace, delivered of her child. A doctor was called to attend her, and Tita saw that all was done without the knowledge of his master, who was not fit to be told, and who had evidently forgotten her existence. He had certainly asked after her and given instructions that she was to ask him for anything she desired. He had sent her flowers to her room. But what happened one day was usually forgotten by the next.

One night, when the room was heavy with smoke and the fumes of wine, when the men were dicing and the noise of the Carnival came through the open window from the canal, Byron lay back in his chair, a great carved throne of gilt and crimson fit for a Borgia, a painted woman lolling on the arm, his head on the all but bare breast of another female, both babbling in drunken foolishness over his head. His shirt was open almost to the waist, its frills falling back over an elaborate gown of brilliant brocade, girded with gold cord, and embroidered in silks. His hair was tumbled and his face bore that look of unrefreshed pallor which an unhealthy life of dissipation produces. His eyes were heavy with drink, and he kept his brain stimulated with a mixture of laudanum and brandy. All sense of dignity had gone, England forgotten, everything that spoke of pride of race or great thoughts.

To this hopeless Byron came Tita to whisper that the master must come and hear what he had to say.

"Presently!" said Byron.

"Now, if you please, my Lord! The little Donna asks for you. It is serious!"

"I can't! Not to-night—to-morrow!" said Byron, scarcely able to grasp what the man said, and to reply.

"My Lord, she is dying," whispered Tita, crossing himself.

The woman whose arm was round Byron's neck became suspicious.

"What are you whispering about?" cried she. "Tell Tita to go to the devil with his cursed secrets!"

" Have you got a new love hidden ? " said the other. " We'll have her out ! We'll throw her into the canal ! "

Byron rose, with Tita's assistance, and swore.

" You'll stay where you are, or get out of the house, damn you ! " he cried. " What's it to you if I have fifty women here ? "

" I'll not get out, and I'll tear their hair from their heads ! " shouted the beauty, endeavouring to pass him.

He struck her across the face with his arm, and sent her reeling against the table. There was consternation and uproar, some of the girls screamed, the men laughed, and picked up the protesting damsel, during which lull in the performance Tita persuaded Byron to come with him out of the room.

" The little Signora wants you, my Lord ! She may not live until to-morrow, and her last wish is important. I know you would not wish her to die unsatisfied."

Byron nodded.

" How's the baby ? " he asked, just as he had asked the same question dozens of times at Piccadilly, when the baby in a room upstairs was Ada. Tita crossed himself.

" The little one did not live," said he. " The doctor will come again soon. He has great doubts."

" I'll come ! " said Byron and, holding Tita's strong arm, he went up to the chamber where the girl lay.

It was quiet. So intensely quiet after the noisy hall that it pierced even the cloud about Byron's mind. It was so cool and dark and still, with the stillness almost of a church. The casement stood open, and the distant sound of gondolas passing or a laugh from below were the only reminder of a world outside. Guiseppe's wife knelt before a crucifix on the wall, and on the couch covered with white lay the little body.

The girl was in bed, gazing out at the low hanging-stars. A lamp burnt in a corner, and a red votive light hung before a statue of the Virgin. Some lilies that Byron had sent stood in glass vase on the table, and their perfume added to the mystery and silence of the room.

Byron, with Tita keeping an affectionate eye upon him, sat down on the bed, and looked at the girl. The rouge and powder that had adorned her face on the night he had found her had been washed away, and left her pale, with dark eyes and white lips. She smiled faintly as she saw Byron, and spoke in a soft, weak voice.

"Ah! My Lord! You have come. I wanted to thank you for your goodness before I go. For I feel I shall go, very soon."

"You're not going to die!" said he. "You're too young! Don't believe them!"

She shook her head.

"I am in God's hands," she answered. "These days of quiet have brought me to a knowledge of His mercy. I have prayed constantly for my redemption, and since my child has been taken I am prepared to follow. You have given me the only help and comfort I have known for many months. You will have given me the opportunity to compose my mind and prepare myself. I wanted to thank you for that above all." She said this so simply and with such deep feeling that he felt tears rising.

"You are so good," she went on. "The Blessed Christ is in you."

Byron looked at her out of his clouded eyes, which never lost the faculty of expressing tenderness when something weak was near him. But he had far from anything holy about his appearance just then.

"I am no Christian," said he. "I have suffered, that's all. You've lost your little baby. So have I. While she lives! That's worse! It's better to lose them altogether. You'll be thankful they didn't steal her. Death is kinder. I can't say what I mean. Don't give in! Fight! Refuse to die; refuse as I do! When people wrong you, fight! No amount of prayer will kill slanderers!"

She was quite conscious, and she realized his condition. It was not easy for him to speak clearly or connectedly. She smiled a little, and took his hand tenderly, patting it as she would a child's. His weakness seemed to give her a little strength.

"I see that you have lost faith," said she. "You will regain it, just as I have done. I know you are good. I saw it in your beautiful eyes. We have both sinned, perhaps. But you have given me my glimpse of heaven before I go and take what judgment is bestowed upon me. You have, indeed!"

"I wish I could die, too!" said he. "But mine would not be beautiful. I shall not go in a halo of faith and beauty."

"You will go in a blaze of glory!" whispered the girl, with a strange look of inspiration. "You will get your reward for you have loved greatly."

His heart hurt him then. He scarcely knew what to do. He wished he had been in full possession of his senses. Again that vivid likeness forced itself upon him. He closed his eyes, and saw the terrace at Annesley, all covered with roses. The quiet room was peaceful and dim. Tita had retired, and Guiseppe's wife stood by the bedside.

The girl was sinking fast. The doctor was sent for and a priest. Byron's nerves were strung to breaking point. He was painfully conscious of the scene before him.

" You had better go, my Lord," said the doctor. " She will have to receive the last Sacrament."

" Oh, God ! let her die like a human being, in my arms ! " cried Byron. " It's all so formal, so cold ! "

The doctor took firm hold of him.

" You are not in a fit condition to be present at such a moment, and you are not a Catholic. You would not understand. I must ask you to retire. It is better so."

The eerie silence of the place grew more intense. The night air blew softly through the casement, and a holy calm pervaded the chamber of death.

" What is it, this mystery ? " whispered Byron, half to himself. " Why do we live and die and what becomes of us after ? "

He stood a moment looking down on the girl. Mary's face lay on the pillow. Hastings rushed back into his mind and the canal lapping the wall outside became the sea, breaking on the shore. Doctors and priests were keeping her from him, and her child was dead. Was it Ada ? And had they killed her ? It was all unbearable ! The girl's eyes opened, and she asked that he should stand near her. He was trembling against the wall, and watched the strange ceremony from the distance like one in a dream. He wondered if he was dreaming. So often the dreams were more real than realities and the people in them more solid. The bell of St. Mark's tolled three.

" Near me ! Near me ! " gasped the girl.

The doctor was about to beckon Byron, when she sighed and lay dead.

Byron longed for light and warmth ; he edged away along the wall until he reached the door, then opened it and fled as fast as he could down the stairs, along the corridor, stumbling against the sides and scarcely aware that he was hitting his shoulder. Into the room where the men were roaring out

songs and the women were laughing. The candles blazed after the darkness.

"Give me a drink for the love of God!" cried Byron. "Let's have life, not death! Love, and the warmth of human arms!" He drew one of the women to him and drank freely. The rest of the night passed in a mist as other nights had passed. Day broke, and the revellers had rushed out to some excitement in the Piazza of St. Mark. Byron became conscious of Fletcher in the room after a while. Fletcher, who never changed, who was always calm and kind and helpful when everything else was chaos. Fletcher's presence always meant cool water on the forehead and a welcome bed to lie on. So for another day he tended his master, so he left him to wait for the coming on of night, and Carnival.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE Carnival, which had lasted three weeks, was fast drawing to a close.

On this last night all the folly of Venice expended itself in one wild endeavour to enjoy itself to the full, ere the coming of Lent. Whatever else they neglected, the Venetians still obeyed the ceremonial calls of their religion. It had long become a mechanical affair. There was little devotion or piety about it, but on the morrow everyone would betake themselves to church and henceforth attend innumerable Masses and Benedictions from a habit of old custom.

To-night the last festivities were in full progress. Every parish had its campo decorated. Even the poorest quarters made a bold attempt to bedeck themselves and their inhabitants in a semblance of "gala dress." The result at times was extremely incongruous. Paper streamers adorned old ramshackle tenements that were begrimed with the dust of ages. The tawdry strings of festoons served to accentuate the dilapidated walls. So also did the dirty ruffles and flimsy caps reveal the poverty and dirt of their wearers. But on Carnival night all enjoyed themselves, and for the moment troubles and anxieties were forgotten.

In the more important campos the decorations were quite in keeping with the occasion.

But the grand centre of it all was, of course, the Piazza of St. Mark.

The great windows were brilliantly lit up with tall candles. Gorgeous draperies hung from balconies, from which the aristocracy of Venice, masked and otherwise disguised in diverse costumes, most of them magnificent, all picturesque, gazed down on a flashing motley crowd that swayed and jostled in a tumult of shouting, singing, playing and dancing.

The Piazza was packed almost to suffocation. Honest citizens rubbed shoulders with every kind of swindler and adventurer. Dames, married or single, mingled with the known wantons of the streets. Everyone was disguised and everyone was happy.

Pierrots, harlequins, monks, doges, pierrettes, Spanish dancers, nuns and queens were there in their hundreds. Other revellers, dressed in more grotesque garbs, created sundry sensations. Two of these, youths dressed as beggars suffering from the plague, and three more as skeletons, displeased some of the crowd and came in for rough handling. A beggar also acted his part so well that he was pelted with missiles and, dropping his crutches, fled like a hare up towards the Merceria, as fast as his legs would carry him.

Such a tumult filled the air. Trumpets were blown, guitars twanged, confetti and streamers were flung in the faces of all.

Some of the spectators in the balconies above amused themselves throwing down sweets, flowers and money to the people. One gentleman lent over and surveying the throng with a contemptuous air, flung a liberal shower of coins. He was not in Carnival dress, but wore a striking suit of green velvet adorned with many orders. He laughed to see the scramble that ensued under the colonnade. All milder diversion was forgotten. Men and women rushed to the spot and fought each other for the lira.

"My dear Prince Metternich," said an elderly man courteously; "may I beg of you to desist? You would not wish to mar the gaiety of the people by recalling them to mundane thoughts of gain."

"On the contrary, Count Guiccioli, I do them the greatest service in the world by appealing to their native passion," answered the Prince, and leaning over again he threw down another shower of coins, seeming to enjoy the confusion that ensued. Women now tore off their dominoes to see the better, and threw themselves on the ground, striking their companions who were quicker than themselves in securing the treasure.

"Pray look, Count," resumed Metternich with polite irony; "see the soul of Venice laid bare. See how they forget their fooling and admirable sport when money is at stake. Truly a great sight!" he added, adjusting his eyeglasses.

"Surely, Prince, you can afford to be generous. You Austrians owe the conquest of this city to Napoleon, yet you find the people of use, it seems. Why despise them so utterly?"

Metternich turned a steely glance on the speaker.

"I find the study of nations of value. And their secrets are to be discovered in such moments as these. Years of theory

and statesmanship will not show me on what material we have to work so quickly as half an hour spent in their company."

"And your opinion is?" queried the other man.

"That the Venetians have ceased to count as a nation. That they are utterly corrupt and can be bought and sold," replied Metternich with scorn.

"I protest," interposed a bright animated little lady who was standing near. Really, your Excellency is wrong!"

The Prince bowed.

"Look for yourself, my dear Countess. See, your pierrot is trying to fling himself on the back of that elderly buffoon in red. The other man was astute enough to get more coins and the youth is quite ready to strangle him for it. As for the women, are they not fighting like cats down there? Ah, the gendarmes . . . in time, I think. Now the Carnival foolery can commence again."

The Countess Benzoni was one of the few society hostesses who had the courage to speak her mind.

"You make too sure, Prince Metternich; you may find some day that the ancient spirit is not dead. No small city in the world has such a splendid fighting record as Venice!"

"It passed away long ago, before we were born," answered the Prince smilingly. "Had the Venetians resisted Napoleon and died fighting to save their city, every nation in Europe would have respected them. What happened? The Doge, sitting in yonder palace, heard the French advancing. He removed his biret from his head and handed it to a servant, saying, 'Take away this bauble, I shall not need it again.' Then he sent envoys to invite Napoleon's army to enter here. Welcomed them with open arms." He turned away with a shrug of his shoulders.

"By heaven, your Excellency!" struck in a tall, handsome youth dressed as a Doge, "you speak with too much confidence. The time is coming, and very soon, when Austria may not find Italians so complaisant."

"Your remarks are very interesting, Signor," said the Prince coldly; "I shall be glad if you will further enlighten me."

Benzoni again intervened.

"Look, all of you—the bull chase. Ah, what sport!" She clapped her pretty hands and pointed to the further end of the Piazza.

A wild shouting heralded the approach of some new excitement. The crowd had massed itself together facing the great clock and now broke up in confusion, rushing right and left as two men, attired grotesquely in a huge bull's skin, the foremost actor carrying a great head and horns, and the latter enveloped in the hide, plunging indiscriminately in the air, made their way towards Florian's café.

This sport was an attempt to revive an ancient pastime when a wild bull had been hunted through the narrow streets of Venice in old Carnival time, to the peril of life and limb.

The mock bull advanced. Women pretended to scream in terror and men tore off their sashes and became Toreadors for the time. Others took flying leaps on the back of the "bull," and then back into the crowd. To the delight of the spectators, a woman advanced with a tray of cakes and offered one to the animal. Then a pair of grimy hands tore off the head and seized the proffered gift. Down sank the "bull," and both the actors devoured dainties to their hearts' content.

More confetti. More streamers. And now the play became much rougher as the time sped on.

Sideshows were erected all round the square. Jugglers and mountebanks, fortune tellers, opera singers and strolling actors had their booths and vied with each other for the patronage of the crowd. One booth, erected on the steps of the church, collapsed and had to be supported by some of the audience. Much panic was caused, but luckily no one was seriously hurt.

Then, to complete the gaiety, a crowd of dancers suddenly hurled themselves in among the tables outside Florian's. Waiters rushed up to expostulate. Tables were overturned and the smashing of glass was heard in conjunction with the angry voices. Of course the delinquents promptly made themselves scarce.

Seated at one of the tables, near the centre of the colonnade, was Byron, accompanied by a vulgar-looking red-haired girl in a bright green shawl. "His Lordship" was a familiar figure at this café, and many envious eyes were darted at his companion. Byron was known to be rich and generous. There was more than one procuress near by, plying her hideous trade. One of these, an old hag, drew her filthy black shawl around her and nudged a girl standing by.

"Maria," she whispered, "see that gentleman there in the blue cloak—there at that table. Get you up near to him and watch your chance."

The girl addressed glanced at Byron. She was very young, little more than a child. But in Venice, the women bartered their daughters freely to any man who would pay the price. The traffic was not unknown among the middle classes. The lower earned their living at it as quite a natural business. There was nothing more terrible than the state of the people in this unhappy city. The poorest lived like beasts, herded together in disgusting rooms that were unfitted for human habitation. The women shuffled about the streets at night, while the men lounged in their taverns to brawl or whine for money which they had not managed to beg or thieve from the "riche Englise." For the dry rot in the soul of Venice had long set in, and the inhabitants were now fast declining into what they soon became—a set of parasites on the foreign visitors.

But this was Carnival, and even the wantons dressed up for their sorry part in it. The girl Maria was gaily attired. The bright colouring of her skirt and shawl was in pitiful contrast to her strained white face, and her eyes were very close together with that cunning monkey expression typical of her class and kind. In them now shone the unmistakable animal glare of the creature who has long bartered herself for money. She glanced at Byron and shook her head.

"The man has Francesca with him," she answered; "see that tall man who has just finished dancing. I will try for him."

The old woman tightened her grip on the girl's arm.

"Imbecile, wait! I'll find Guido. He will lend his boat, and you can get hold of the Englishman and bring him to our place when he is drunk enough. He is very rich, they say. Look at his hands. Those rings are worth much lira."

Byron sat sipping his wine and watching the scene before him. He was conscious of a great sense of weakness. It was not so disagreeable as it might have been. It was rest and relaxation. The lights, the dazzling colours, the tumult pleased him at first. He had a dread of silence. The many hours of stillness in London, the cold isolation of Switzerland, had frozen something within him. Now he wanted warmth, companionship of any kind, human voices and the touch of human hands. So he watched the flitting figures as in a dream. To-night for the first time his brain was playing him tricks.

Try as he would, he found himself remembering things and

people that had no connection with the Carnival. He felt a sense of detachment from himself. The balconies above him had the queerest way of becoming the boxes of Drury Lane Theatre, and the din around him brought back remembrances of that night when he had looked down from his own box to a sea of faces turned towards him and he could almost hear the cries and hisses again. Then he seemed to be floating above the square and the crowd beneath seemed far away. St. Mark's reeled and then swayed away into the night. The torches from the booths and platforms became beacons on hills. It was all very confusing. His brain was on fire. He drank mechanically and saw the woman opposite him toss off her own glass and refill it.

He gave a half cry now and felt terrified. The sense of companionship had vanished. He was alone. This was a madhouse and he had lost his reason. These figures were the creation of his mind. The noise, the lights, and the coloured dresses thrilled him with a sickening fear of himself. He staggered to his feet. Good God! It had come at last: the one blight he had dreaded most of all—madness! Other people were mad. He heard the booming of waves and saw a woman's face look vacantly into his own.

Around him the fun had grown fast and furious. The Carnival was now at its height. All his own emotions were within himself. To others he was merely a well-dressed man half drunk. He made an ineffective effort to rise. Then fell back, and many around him laughed. The woman looked at him, filled a large glass and pushed it across to him.

"Drink it; thou art ill," she said in a thick voice. She was now half muddled herself with the wine she had taken.

Byron looked at the glass, raised it to his lips, drained it, and dropped back into his chair, almost falling across the table. At this moment a tall, dark woman who had been making her way towards the two, suddenly darted in and seized her red-haired rival, dragging her from her seat.

"Ah, pig, fool! Dost thou think to keep the Milord from me?" she shrieked.

"You are not his wife, I am not his wife," shouted the girl. "Your husband is one cuckold, mine another." Then she attacked her assailant in full force, kicking and striking at her to release herself.

"Go thy ways," yelled the dark-haired woman; "he is mine. I live with him at the palace."

" Till Tita the gondolier flung thee out on the door-steps at his bidding for stealing from him. Tita told me," laughed the girl vindictively.

More slapping and fighting ensued. A crowd quickly gathered round them. Waiters rushed up to part the combatants. Onlookers joined in. Suddenly Marianna Segatti, the aggressor, drew a comb from her head and plunged it in the other's arm. Bedlam ensued. Men rushed for the police. Women shrieked and tried to drag the two apart. They kicked and bit the hands that held them. Then went on with the fight again.

By this time the *mêlée* had shifted itself from the table and Byron lay half unconscious across it. He was partially roused by a harlequin dashing past him and flicking the table with his wand. He raised himself and fell back against his chair. The spangled figure gyrated before his eyes ; it recalled memories of a small, lithe man dancing in a low, long room and drunken sailors. It struck full into his wandering mind and he saw a tall, cloaked, dignified figure watching the scene. He wondered if he was dying, for the cloaked figure was himself. Yet so different. Then a choking sensation caught him in the throat and he sank across the table with a sob. When he looked up the balconies were swaying over his head and he wondered if the people in them would fall on the top of him. Then a pair of soft arms wound themselves around him and a girl's white face looked into his.

" Come home with me," she whispered.

" Who are you ? " he muttered.

" Maria ; come home with me."

" Mary ! . . . Is your name Mary ? " said Byron in English.

She did not understand.

" Come, Signor . . . you are tired. . . . Rest in my room."

The square was fading. He saw a terrace covered with red roses.

" Yes, Mary . . . I can rest in your room," he murmured. His eyes closed and his head fell back on her shoulder.

The old woman, who had drawn near to watch, moved up and said to the girl rapidly :

" Quick ! Guido has the boat. He will get him to our place."

The crowd was dispersing now. The fighting women had vanished, dragged protesting from the scene. The Carnival was wild almost to madness. No one thought it strange to

see two women and a gondolier help the Englishman up, and the waiter who hurried to them for his money settled the question of the bill by putting his hand in Byron's pocket and taking out some coins.

"Give me back the purse," said the old woman, snatching it when the man drew that out as well, and she clutched it from him and thrust it in her shawl. The man grinned and proceeded to clear the table. It was no affair of his.

With great difficulty they half led, half carried Byron to the piazetta. After some time they reached the landing stage and got him into a gondola. The women stepped in beside him.

"Quick—you know where, Guido; the back of the Friary," said the girl. "We must get him home before he wakes."

The boat slowly glided away.

"Pietro," said the Countess Benzoni to her friend, as they sat together in the balcony sipping coffee, "I wish you would go down and see if Lord Byron is there. He is sure to be at the Carnival, and his lameness makes it very difficult for him to get about."

"Lord Byron does not interest me," answered the youth coldly.

"The judgment of a child," answered the Countess; "some day you may understand," and she sighed heavily. Then roused herself to watch the revelry again.

* * * * * *

When Byron opened his eyes twenty-four hours later he was alone. Lying on a hard bed, he looked up at a dark, low ceiling begrimed with dust and cobwebs. The place was gloomy and the light obscured by filthy paper stretched across the small opening that served as a window. He closed his eyes and tried to remember what had happened . . . where he had been . . . and where he was now. In vain. The semi-darkness pressed down on him. His head was hot and he was shivering from head to foot. Then he roused himself and tried to stir. At last he became more accustomed to the room.

The walls were a dark red, cracked and marked with dirt and damp. The ceiling, or what could be glimpsed of it, for it was rotten and falling off in pieces, had evidently been painted at some far-off time, for he could dimly discern the cloak of a figure and a helmet. Discoloured plaster had been daubed over the whole.

Not far from the pallet on which he was lying stood a broken washstand. Near by a chair on which ware thrown some stockings and a rusty black shawl. The fringe was torn and wet. It had been used to wipe up some water that was running from the stand towards the door. That was also black and broken. It swung to and fro as the wind blew through the paper covering of the window.

Byron suddenly gave a start. Something touched his hand. It was a spider and he shook it off, and made a violent effort to struggle up and put his feet to the floor.

" Good God ! where upon earth am I ? " he whispered, and his voice died away. The perspiration was pouring from him as he made the endeavour to move.

" Fletcher ! . . . Tita ! " he called again, but the sound of his own wavering voice mocked him. Some instinct warned him to get air as soon as possible, and he almost flung himself forward and managed to let his feet fall to the ground. Then he staggered up and, holding to the bed, edged himself round towards the window, reached it and thrust his hand through the paper, leaning out as the rush of air stirred and refreshed him.

The window was one of many tenements and looked down on a horrible little courtyard surrounded with innumerable other windows, most of them either covered with ragged washing hanging out or else looking into dens from which women were leaning out talking or moving about inside. Byron could see shoes, vegetables, bottles and bed-clothes on the various window sills. The smell from the place beneath turned him sick, and he drew back again. As he passed his hand across his forehead and drew it down he gave a start. His rings had gone.

Then he looked around again, wondering into what house he had been brought.

Recollections of a place filled with a moving crowd, of flickering lights and swaying balconies floated into his mind. He remembered harlequins and people with horns on their heads.

A cracked mirror hung on the wall, and he suddenly caught sight of his own face. It stared at him like a dead man.

" My God, not here. . . Not here," he cried. To die in this hovel alone. No, at all costs he must get away. Then he heard the sound of voices beneath. He would call someone to help him.

Feeling faint he leant out of the window and looked down. Here was someone at last. A man was coming towards the place with a weird dancing step. What was he doing that for? The Carnival should have finished by now. On came the creature with knees twisted in and feet splaying out, hideous to behold, shouting and talking to himself. Byron caught a glimpse of a face scarcely human, and drew back with a shudder. Venice was full of distorted hunchbacks, staggering about half paralysed, pitiable witnesses to the long centuries of lust and corruption that was destroying the race. More steps. Women bent and unkempt shuffled through the courtyard carrying bundles or buckets.

He decided to make his way downstairs unaided. His cloak had been taken, but, to his relief, his stick was left.

He was grateful for its help and, leaning on it, he managed to walk painfully to the door. A dark piece of sacking hung over it, and thrusting it aside he saw a flight of rickety steps. The only support was a piece of rope that served as a banister.

How Byron reached the ground floor he never knew. It seemed an age till he took his foot from the first step to the last. Then he found himself in a small dark wine shop with sand on the floor and small wooden tables and benches. At the further end was a small counter. A woman was serving, and noticing him she sent a youth over to ask him what he wanted. The effort of descent had made Byron limp, and his foot was giving him terrible pain.

"I would like some cognac if you have it," he said, and sat down. Then regretted that he had not made for the street, for the other customers were regarding him with curious eyes.

They were the usual type of customer found in such a place. Old men from the market; tattered women and beggars taking their meal before commencing their daily round.

The cognac was brought and he drank it quickly, anxious to go.

Then he rose and limped to the counter to pay for it. The woman held out her hand for the money. He found his purse and money had vanished.

"I am sorry; my money has been stolen," he said quietly. "Give me your address and I will send the money to you."

In another instant he was surrounded by a swarm of barefoot, grimy children, and a man came up to him from the other end of the shop.

"What do you all want? Get away," said Byron.

The woman shrieked out oaths and demanded payment for the brandy. The other customers got up to listen.

" Let me get out of this," said Byron angrily. " I will send the money ; give me the address of this place."

" One hundred liras for the room and twenty for the cognac to you," said the man insolently.

Ill as he was this roused Byron's spirit and he thrust the children aside and stepped to the door.

" Let me pass, or I will send your payment in another way," he said. " I have been robbed here and I shall communicate with the police."

He knew the people he had to deal with. The house was one of ill fame—that was clear from the room he had just quitted—and his one desire was to get away before he felt too ill to stir again.

The word " police " acted like magic. The man and his wife said no more and left him to go as he pleased. Of all houses in Venice this was one that would be least anxious for inspection.

So Byron walked out without further hindrance and dragged his weary feet along the courtyard, along the narrow streets, leaning on his stick and looking for some turning by which he could make his way back to the Palace.

Men lay asleep in doorways, and houses with washing seemed to shut out the sky. Shops here and there piled up with sausages or fried fish and steaming polenta, shot out from unexpected corners, making him feel sick with their odours.

Byron had never loathed Venice as he did now. Poverty he could have pitied, but this squalor and degradation, this lack of all cleanliness in the streets and houses and their wretched people, revolted him. The women in their frowsy shawls and the men lounging sodden with drink in the wine shops, whilst children played in the garbage or rushed begging to him when they caught sight of him, made him long to get away. For the worst of it was that these people were not really so poor as utterly idle, dirty and vicious.

Every byway seemed the same to him as he dragged along with his head reeling.

At last he came out into a campo and saw the canal in the distance.

" Oh, thank God ! " he muttered. He hurried now in the hope of finding Tita somewhere near. In any case there

would be plenty of boats. He knew now he was ill, desperately ill, and redoubled his failing strength.

Suddenly he found himself close to the fish market. The noise deafened him. Women were pulling meat off stalls and haggling for bargains, men from the fish market yelling their prices, others wheeling trolleys of ice dangerously near his feet.

His extraordinary face and head attracted attention. He was hatless and elegantly attired. Now he longed for his cloak to cover him. Women pointed him out and laughed. He turned away and limped painfully towards the spot where he thought he saw poles standing up out of the water. There would be boats there. But the children gathered round, pointing to his feet and begging for coin. They closed round him with their insolent faces and shrieked after him, mimicking his gait. For the lowest Venetian children were little removed from savages and many years older than their years.

" Oh God ! to get out of this before I fall down," thought Byron. He realized something serious was the matter with him and his strength was fast failing. At last he made his way to where he saw some gondolas drawn up.

" Signor, a gondola," said a man, stepping forward.

" Quick ! The Palace Mocenigo ; get me home."

The other had just time to catch Byron as he swayed forward. Another gondolier came to his aid, and between them they got him into the boat.

Was this death ? It was very soothing to lie there as the gondola slowly glided down. Byron lay with his eyes closed, conscious of little else save the ripple of the water. He was so weary that the pain seemed to have left him. Only once he opened his eyes as the motion stopped. Then smiled. He saw Fletcher and Tita waiting on the Palace steps.

After that he lay asleep for many days, dreaming strange fancies — oblivious of the fact that he was in the throes of a dangerous fever. The weakness was so welcome : the stillness after all that tumult and noise of the preceding time. He never knew that Fletcher knelt beside his bed in the night waiting for him to wake up or pass away.

But when he came to himself at last, he was lying in the great canopied bed, looking out of the window at the dark blue sky and the stars shining down on him. All the feverish hours had vanished. His mind was quite clear now.

" Why, Fletcher, are you there still ? " he said faintly with a smile, and heard the well-known voice beside him.

" Yes, my Lord. How are you feeling now? What can I get for you? "

He stretched out a transparent hand and took Fletcher's.

" I want nothing, thank you ; only to sleep on. How long have I been ill? "

" Just over a month, my Lord."

" So long ! What a lovely sky, Fletcher. I've often seen it like that from my room at Newstead. I wish I was there now," said Byron dreamily.

" Perhaps you will be some day," answered the valet. " Just lie still and get stronger, my Lord. Then you will be able to go home."

" I wonder," said Byron wistfully ; and closing his eyes he fell into a long and healing sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"To-night is most interesting," said a lady named Castella, at the first reception of the season given by Countess Bensoni.

"Why?" inquired Signora Sorelli, whose interest in the function centred mainly round those whom she could scandalize on future occasions.

"Do you not know? The new Countess Guiccioli is to be present! She was married recently, and is the wife of one of the most important men in Italy. A young girl—only sixteen. But still, the Count must have found some great attraction or advantage in marrying her, and the Countess Bensoni, always so charming and kind, has devoted this evening to introducing the young bride. They live, I hear, in Ravenna. The Count has business everywhere. He is here on Government work and it is only right that his young wife should have the opportunity of becoming acquainted with Venetian society."

"Of course," said Signora Sorelli, with a good deal of condescension, "I hope she will be duly grateful. These very youthful brides are apt to underrate their blessings."

"I have not heard that she is of that kind."

"It is always a doubtful affair welcoming newcomers. One has to be careful. I hope she is worth it. I have never heard of her. Where does she come from?"

"She is the daughter of old Count Gamba of Romagna. You know the Gambas? Young Pietro, the son, is a rabid Carbonari and dying to overthrow the Government. I think it is only a passing craze. They are a good family. But I have heard they are very poor, and this marriage will be of great advantage. I think that is why the girl has been given to old Guiccioli. He has had three wives already and is over sixty."

"Dangerous?"

"It all depends."

Signora Sorelli suspended judgment until she should have the opportunity of seeing and judging for herself.

The Countess Bensoni was, as usual, full of life and talk—a delightful hostess and capable of expressing that enjoyment in her reception that made a visit to her palace a thing of happy memories. She had a bright word for everyone, discussed everything with equal interest, and had that excellent faculty indispensable to the woman whose position demands a great amount of entertaining, of making each person feel that they and they alone were the sole object of the whole affair.

Among a distinguished throng, she saw the Hoppners, Byron's friends, and she took her chance of asking them if they had seen him of late.

"I have invited Byron," said she; "do you think he will come?"

Mr. Hoppner considered.

"He may. I don't know. He has been so dreadfully ill."

"What happened? I saw him at the Carnival and thought something ought to be done to stop him ruining himself in that way. It is very sad. Has he been ill long?" asked Bensoni.

"Ever since that night. It appears he arrived home next morning in a state of collapse, and when I saw him I thought he was on the way to die. It had to come sooner or later. I have seen it for a long time. Fletcher has had a terrible time with him. It's almost three weeks now. He insisted on getting up the moment he was able and wrote so many letters that he fainted. When Byron writes letters they go into volumes, you know."

"How is he now?"

"It is very difficult to say. He has been unable to eat much and seems very weak. He is apt to brood and worry and his nerves are worn to a thread, what with one thing and another. I hope he comes here to-night. It will do him a great deal of good to get amongst people again and break himself of going to the devil."

"What he wants is a woman to look after him," said Mrs. Hoppner.

"Precisely; but he never chooses the right woman," replied her husband.

The word had gone round that Lord Byron was expected. It caused a stir.

"What! the man who lives at the Palace Mocenigo?"

"The man who keeps a harem?"

"No! Does he?"

"I have heard so."

" He was turned out of England for worse than that ! "

" I'm surprised that Countess Bensoni allows him to come here."

" Yes, with this young Countess to be present. It is most unwise." This from Signora Sorelli, who contrived to hear everything, whether addressed to her or not.

The buzz of anticipation that had been caused by the knowledge that Byron was to invade the Venetian salons again after his disgraceful career on the Grand Canal, was just then turned into another channel by the arrival of the Count and Countess Guiccioli.

All heads were turned towards the door where, beside an old man, white-haired, thin, precise, sharp of feature and of countenance immovable, sparkling with orders and leaning on a stick, stood Teresa, Countess Guiccioli, the fairest flower that ever bloomed under Italian skies.

She was dressed in white with flowers in her yellow-auburn hair, which fell round her face in a mass of ringlets. She was not tall, but of a compact and pretty figure. Her complexion was of cream suffused with roses, and had that warm tint that is often seen in Italian faces. Her large eyes were fringed by very long lashes, several shades darker than her hair. She had a sweet, quiet, self-possessed expression and a delightful smile. It was not surprising that some said she seemed older than sixteen, for although she was modest and youthful she had yet a manner which suggested a well-balanced mind, beyond her years.

The old Count gave an impression that he had bought and paid for her, and was trying her like a young horse.

It was an hour later when Teresa, a little thankfully perhaps, went with the Countess Bensoni on to the balcony and, free from inspection, hugged her in her girlish fashion.

" Thank you, dear Signora," said she ; " it is charming to visit you. I have been so bored of late ! "

" Bored ? " said Bensoni ; " why, surely you have had plenty to do. Now tell me how you are progressing."

Teresa looked out at the passing boats.

" It is strange to be married," said she ; " but I suppose I must not complain." As she spoke she sighed.

" The Count treats you well ? " asked Bensoni.

" Oh, yes. He gives me things. Perhaps it is because I am unused to my new life, but I feel tired sometimes and tied, as though I were a bird in a cage. That is wrong, is it not ? "

" Teresa, you are not happy ? " said Bensoni, but Teresa, evidently wishing to make the best of things, denied it.

" Do you love your husband ? " asked Bensoni. Teresa hesitated.

" I do not know," said she. " I have had no opportunity to find out. He only sees me at meals and for an hour in the evening. I am only a wife in name. I obeyed my father, that is all."

" I understand," said Bensoni. " It is a pity."

" It is my destiny, I suppose," answered the girl.

" Come, let us go to the salon. Some day you must come and talk to me. I think you have much to say."

Returning to the room, Teresa was assailed by those whose business it was to find out anything they could about newcomers to Venice and so have something to talk about, with variations, for the season. To all questions and shows of interest she replied gracefully, seeming to tell a lot and telling, in truth, nothing at all.

Her husband discussed her freely.

" You are fortunate, my dear Count, in securing such a delightful young bride," remarked a lady to him.

" Yes, yes. I am fortunate. She is very young, but she will soon fall into her duties as head of my table tolerably well. She is quite intelligent. Having been in a convent until her marriage, she cannot be expected to become used to her position all at once. I am extremely busy these days. It is well that she amuses herself easily."

Pietro Gamba eyed his venerable brother-in-law with inward fury. He had not liked his sister's marriage to this cold, formal old man from the first. But he did not voice his views, for their father's word was law.

Teresa appeared to enjoy all the flutter that went on. She had a simple and direct manner of address that made her acceptable in conversation and she was surrounded very soon by a host of inquisitive ladies.

Did she like pictures ? Had she any taste for music ? Had she read Dante ? Did she admire poetry ?

" I adore it ! " she replied. " I read poetry every day."

" Shakespeare, of course ? "

" Yes, and Lord Byron. He is my favourite."

" Really ? Do you know that he lives in Venice, and that he is expected here to-night ? "

Teresa blushed and caught her breath, as if the news had given her a little tremble of the heart.

" How wonderful ! I have long wished to meet him and hear him speak. Signor, is it not splendid that Lord Byron is coming here ? You have read his glorious poetry ? "

She addressed this to her husband.

" My business is of a more practical nature. I cannot spend time in reading nonsense," answered the Count. " Do not become so excited, Teresa. You have disturbed the arrangement of your hair."

" I am sorry, Signor," said she, crushed by his tone. The Count went on to talk of politics. She did not understand them, and only made a show of listening.

The evening drew on and the music began. Teresa was tired. She longed to go home. She liked the quiet veranda much better than the salon and, at a favourable moment, on pretence of speaking to her hostess, she slipped away. The stars had come out and the water was gently lapping outside.

The Countess Bensoni was indeed on the veranda, talking to someone who had evidently just arrived by gondola. Teresa, shy of intruding, waited by the window—a white, shimmering form in the semi-darkness.

" You are very wicked to come so late," Bensoni was saying ; " but I am very glad to see you."

" I have been trying to make up my mind to come at all," replied a curious male voice, deep and harmonious, with a strange languor, as though the speaker had just been roused from sleep. Teresa found it fascinating. She had to stay and listen.

" How are you ? " asked Bensoni.

" Quite all right," replied the man.

" He isn't," thought Teresa. " He has not been well. He's only pretending."

" You have been a very, very bad child to become so ill," said Bensoni, with too much kindness to be really scolding. " You have given us a great deal of worry."

The male voice laughed and it sounded ten years younger.

" I've given a terrific lot of trouble to my friends ever since I was born," it said ; " but to you in particular I must apologize."

" He has been a bad child and given a lot of trouble," thought Teresa. " Now, what has he done ? "

She edged a little nearer, still out of sight, behind a projecting pillar.

"Never mind," said Bensoni. "Now, come and show yourself."

"I'm not worth showing and terribly nervous."

"You're much more worth showing now than you were three weeks ago, my dear! I wouldn't have shown you to a dog then!"

"The dog would have forgiven me, I'm sure. They're the only people who never remind one of faults."

Teresa puzzled her brains.

"He has done something," said she.

She became so interested that she was almost beside him before she knew. Bensoni saw her and started forward.

"Ah! this is delightful," said she. "Permit me to present Lord Byron. The Countess Guiccioli."

Teresa's heart jumped. She knew "Childe Harold" from end to end. She curtseyed and gave him her hand, trembling.

"I am most happy to meet you," said she rather shakily.

He looked at her and knitted his brows as if trying to remember something.

"You are Pietro Gamba's sister?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And Count Guiccioli's wife?"

"Yes."

He continued to gaze at her before replying, with an odd quiver in his voice:

"I, also, am most happy to meet you."

On beholding Byron, a man whom she had so often visualized, Teresa received the greatest shock she had ever experienced. When one reads and loves an author's works it is not unusual to create a mental picture of the man who wrote the words one so admires.

Teresa had, for a long time, thought of Byron as very tall and commanding, strong of build and yet graceful, athletic, and the first to win laurels in the Stadium. Dark, with long waving hair and possessing very dark flashing eyes. She had thought him the embodiment of masculine strength and idealism, and endowed with immortal youth. In fact, she had scarcely thought of him as a mortal at all.

As she gave her hand and answered the few questions mentioned, they exchanged the usual formalities of introduction. Her deep young mind cogitated rapidly.

" Yes, I was right ; he is not well," she thought.

She did not know if she was going to like him, he had so entirely shattered her vision.

And when he accompanied her to the salon with Bensoni in the middle holding both their arms, Teresa saw that he was lame and walked wearily, as though his body was exhausted. She came to the conclusion that some accident had been the cause of his illness and hoped to hear something about it later on.

Byron for his part was feeling the strain of meeting new people, and he also imagined that many English visitors who had known him in the old days might be there and would probably ignore or pity him. He was nervous at the thought of having to talk to new acquaintances. At the last moment he had almost stayed at home. Then he had told himself that he must make the effort. He had been too long away from social life of the right kind.

Sitting alone in his room he had pictured the Countess of Jersey's receptions, seen her splendid rooms filled with people clamouring for a sight of him. He remembered, too, how they had turned away and slighted him ; but foremost came the memory of the best days.

" I want them back, just a little echo of them. I want to see decent people and hear cultured voices, even if I never go again." He had cried a little, tears came almost for nothing, and his emotions were out of control altogether. He started at the merest sound. He had been too nervous to let Fletcher make an elaborate business of his toilet, but his appearance was quite to that worthy's satisfaction.

The Hoppners proved a great help and comfort to him. There is nothing worse to a nervous subject than the knowledge that people are gazing at him, and those people strangers.

Most of them had seen Byron often ; many of them knew his history and had discussed his Venetian life. Not a few despised him in consequence.

Others, however, took a sympathetic view and felt a great interest in him. Of course he was presented to Count Guiccioli.

That enigmatic gentleman looked at him, bowed, and looked again. They talked together.

" You must, at some future time, come to my villa. My library is considered one of the finest in Italy. I have no time for reading now, but Teresa reads to me sometimes. I feel

sure you will be interested to examine my books. They are very valuable."

"If only on that account I should be charmed to see them," said Byron.

"Oh, but we have beautiful books," said Teresa; "wonderful books—I mean the insides. I do not mind the value of their bindings, do you?"

Byron smiled.

"If one is to appreciate a pudding, one must eat it," said he. Which remark struck Teresa as exceedingly unpoetic, but it amused her.

"Certainly, and I love pudding of all kinds," she said.

"I am sorry to hear that," answered Byron; "but I am nevertheless glad it agrees with you."

"Why are you sorry I like pudding?" asked Teresa.

"The old fable of sour grapes, I expect," said Byron, catching her youthful spirit.

"Teresa, your talk is foolish," remarked the Count. Teresa lost her smile.

"I am sorry, Signor," said she quietly.

Byron's eyes flashed for a brief moment.

She saw it. Then his eyes could flash; but why? Because her husband had rebuked her for foolishness? Could it be that Byron understood how she felt and was inwardly angry? She saw a kindred soul—someone who understood something. She longed to have an hour to talk to Byron alone. He was so much more to her liking than anyone she had met.

The progress of the evening prevented them from speaking more freely, and they were often separated. Yet now and again they would both look round at the same moment to see what the other one was doing. There was dancing presently and Teresa led the minuet with a gentleman of high rank. She wished that Byron could have danced with her.

Countess Bensoni, thoughtlessly and more from habit than anything else, had asked Byron to dance with Teresa on the second measure commencing. His pale face flushed and his eyes flashed again. His brow frowned, and he seemed to stiffen all over. His voice trembled as he answered:

"I must beg to be excused. . . . Forgive me, Countess"—this to Teresa.

"This is more than an accident," thought she; "he resents it. I must remember not to ask him anything about it."

"I am very tired; pray excuse me, Signora Bensoni,"

she said; "I would far rather rest during this dance in the cool."

"Then sit here on the veranda and talk to Lord Byron," replied her hostess.

"That will be delightful," exclaimed Teresa; and kissing her motherly friend, she turned to Byron, smiled up at him, and said, "Come along."

"There was an air about Teresa that in another girl would have been forward and indelicate. With her it was simply natural freedom of mind. She spoke so prettily in her soft Romagnese tongue, and had such a grave, decided, unaffected way with her, that what might have been undesirable in a girl of less breeding and intellect was only charming and refreshing in herself.

Having reached the veranda, they sat down and watched the canal in silence. Neither spoke a word for some time, and Byron, weary of talking after his illness and the strange confusion that comes to a mind impaired with dissipation, sat looking out with his head supported on his hand, leaning on the balustrade, and promptly forgot the Countess. She did not mind but sat silent, studying his face by the light of the lamp that hung above them. At last he started violently.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," he said. "I fear I am most discourteous."

"No; why do you think so? You were thinking," replied Teresa.

"Yes, Countess, I was thinking," he replied.

"Well, then, I would not like to interrupt good thought," she answered. "Do not talk to me just because it is right to talk to people; they all do that, and I find these receptions so very wearisome; do you?"

"I have not been in the public eye for some time," he replied. "I have found to-night fatiguing, but then I have not been particularly well for three weeks," he added after a pause.

Here was the point Teresa was anxious to investigate.

"No, I thought not. I trust your illness has not been of too serious a nature?"

"It was my own fault and thoroughly deserved," Byron said.

"Really? But I do not think people ever deserve to be ill unless they eat too many sweetmeats or stop out in the rain,

or stay in the sea too long. Have you done something of that sort ? "

Byron smiled and she was glad. Teresa had begun to like that smile.

" I may have taken too many sweetmeats ; I don't know. I certainly do stay out in the rain, and I have been guilty of swimming in the sea too long, but I do not imagine that any of these indiscretions are to account for my illness."

Her eyes searched his.

" You must come and see my garden," she said ; " it is very, very beautiful. Full of roses now ! "

She wondered why Byron looked tragic for a moment.

" Really ? . . . full of roses . . . how charming," he said, mechanically.

" Yes, it is so pretty. We have a long pergola of stone above the terrace. The roses there are truly glorious. I am glad to come here. Venice agrees with me much better than Ravenna, and I hope we stay some time."

" Yes, I hope so too," said Byron. " I must really see that stone pergola covered with roses, above the terrace."

His voice trembled again. She heard it.

" Am I tiring you ? " she said.

" No. Why ? "

" You were a little faint, I thought."

Byron laughed nervously.

" I go like that now and again . . . with any shock."

Teresa was all concern.

" Have I given you a shock ? . . . Did I say something ? . . . I did not know."

He shook his head.

" No. The mention of that pergola, it just reminds me . . . that's all. Take no notice. I do stupid things and get fancies. Isn't it ridiculous ? "

" No. Why ? You must get much stronger." Teresa looked at him tenderly. " The garden will do you good. When will you come ? "

" How do you know the Count will approve of my coming ? " asked Byron curiously. " I am a stranger to him and you. True, he has invited me to see his books, but he won't want a useless creature like me lounging about the garden very often."

" He is so often away from home," laughed Teresa. " It would be delightful for you to come. I am so often alone."

" I should think his objections would be stronger on that account, then," remarked Byron.

She turned wide questioning eyes upon him.

" Oh, why ? " she exclaimed. " I should think he would be pleased."

" You're only sixteen ; I forgot that," said Byron.

" Yes, I suppose I am young. Sometimes I feel old. I think loneliness makes one old, but I will not be so lonely now that I have met you and Mr. and Mrs. Hoppner and all these people. It will be delightful. I will plan a reception in my garden."

Byron looked at her with an appeal in his eyes.

" May I . . . May I come one day just alone ? . . . Just you and the Count . . . to see the books and the roses ? I fear people sometimes."

He was surprised at himself. For Byron to admit fear was something new. He had admitted everything to Augusta. No one else knew his fear, and now he found himself confiding his weakness to a young girl he had met only a few hours ago.

" You fear people ? Yes, I can understand. They are very trying sometimes. I often feel dreadfully nervous when we are going to some great house to meet ambassadors and kings and all those stupid people. They are so difficult to talk to. They always seem to be pretending ; they are not real."

" No, they always pretend," replied Byron ; " they think they like you, while you are famous and unscathed, but the moment a breath of scandal sweeps you . . . I . . . sorry," he broke off ; " you would not understand."

She said nothing. She could not comprehend his strange way of flashing out and checking himself as suddenly.

" He has had great trouble," she told herself.

" Do you ever go to Confession ? " she asked simply.

He half smiled.

" No. I am not a Catholic, and I could never confess anything to someone I did not know intimately."

She nodded.

" I have, of course, been brought up to confess. I find it very helpful. My confessions have helped me to conform to my father's wishes . . . to marry . . . to . . ." She broke off confusedly.

" Countess, are you happily married ? " said Byron quietly.

She hesitated before she answered.

" I must become used to my new life."

He laid his hand on hers. " Are you happy, though ? "

" I am lonely. . . I . . . I . . . Oh, don't question me so." Her tears were very near.

" I am sorry. Of course I could not expect you to answer me. I felt I knew you very well . . . very well . . . like a sister almost."

Teresa looked at him but made no reply.

" Forgive me," repeated Byron. " It seems natural that we should speak freely to one another."

Teresa nodded.

" Yes, it does," she faltered. " Isn't it strange? Have you a sister ? "

He bit his lip and found a difficulty in answering.

" Yes, in England. She is married. She could not come out to me here."

" You will not visit England for some time ? "

" Never again, unless things change very considerably there—if my child should be restored to me and . . . No, never again. I am sure it will never be."

Teresa wondered what he meant, but their newly made friendship prevented both from speaking freely. Yet both felt a desire to be confidential. She possessed a beautiful share of youthful curiosity, and she longed to know in what way Byron had been " a bad child," according to Bensoni's remark. She was looking at him and almost asking a question when he turned to her suddenly and said :

" My illness was not due to sea bathing, sugar plums or rain ; it was the awful abominable life I led in this place."

She started and looked scared for a moment. The words came as an answer to her own unspoken inquiry. Byron continued :

" You must not make friends with me, Countess. I am not fit to sit in your presence. I am utterly worthless and have a stained and despised name, and I thoroughly deserve it, too."

Teresa smiled.

" Please do not be so distressed," she said simply ; " you must not worry yourself so much. I feel sure you exaggerated just because you have been ill ; you will feel better soon."

She touched his hand very gently. He rose.

" Shall we return to the salon ? " he said, trembling very much.

" Yes, it has turned chilly, and my husband will wonder

where I am. It has been strange, talking here in the darkness. I seem to know you so well now."

"And I you," said Byron; "but I must remind you—I'm a bad character."

She laughed sweetly.

"Then I like bad characters," said she. "I've never met one before."

Her light tone made his serious. He did not answer at once.

"Come back to the salon," he said at last, and she thought he limped very heavily as they returned to the light. The hour was late; guests were departing, and the Count claimed his wife.

"It is time we took our leave, Teresa," he said. "You are fatigued." Then turning to Byron, "Good-night. Remember, my library is at your service, and I am sure the Countess has been telling you about her garden."

"Yes, the pergola of roses on the terrace," said Byron.

"They are in excellent condition, but of course I have far greater interests than flowers to absorb me. This rebellion. All very amusing. I have much to give my attention to. We shall hope to see you at some time." With this the Count bowed formally and turned away to some other person.

Byron kissed Teresa's hand. They looked at one another. They both smiled: he sadly, she innocently and with great sympathy. Soon she was gone.

Bensoni took Byron's arm.

"When all are gone, stay awhile with me and the Hoppners," said she. "It is joyous to have you here again."

Byron was standing looking at the spot where Teresa had stood.

"No, I want to go alone, on the water," said he.

"You must not become solitary. It is bad for you."

"I am tired. I want to be alone," he answered.

"What is the matter? You seem disturbed. I wish you would stay. You frighten me when you look so mysterious."

"Forgive me. It is only weariness. I have not been well. Let me go, please." Although he said this with his usual smile, Bensoni knew he was desperate to get away. She held him tight.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Don't be afraid to tell me."

"You're the soul of goodness; but, believe me, I only want

to talk to the stars. They understand me very well. It has been delightful to-night." He forced himself to assume a light tone.

"You like the Countess? Is she not charming?"

"She is, as you say, charming."

He said good-night and departed in his gondola.

"Something has upset him," said Bensoni to Mr. Hoppner, who had come beside her to watch Byron glide away.

"Yes, I noticed it," he replied.

"He won't do anything foolish, will he?"

"Probably," said Hoppner.

"What can have caused such agitation?" Bensoni wondered.

"When a man imprisoned is released for a day and sees the fresh spring flowers and breathes the air of heaven, it usually agitates him exceedingly," suggested Hoppner.

Bensoni considered a moment and then nodded.

"Oh, I see," said she. "Just so. Well, I'm not surprised."

Neither was she surprised some time later to hear that the Countess Guiccioli had left her husband's roof, and that Lord Byron had become her protector.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

In the happy months that followed, Byron, with Teresa beside him, poured out his genius in a new form, that of poetic drama. Personal broodings were laid aside, and in the creation of such works as "Cain," "Sardanapalus," "The Two Foscari," and "Marino Faliero," he rose to grander heights of imagination and rugged power than ever before. But "Don Juan" he now loathed.

"I suppose some day, Teresa, when I am dead, the imbecile public and still more imbecile critics will laud that wretched thing as 'Lord Byron's greatest masterpiece,'" he said bitterly. "If they could only know how I despise it and myself for ever having allowed it to be published. Murray and Hobhouse were quite right at the time, only I would not give in."

"I am so glad you have laid it aside, Byron; I felt it was never worthy of you," said Teresa gently.

Byron looked at her sadly.

"That's the worst of it. It was worthy of me . . . in Venice. I wrote it with my brain on fire with drink and misery. I flung all the bitterness and contempt in my heart into it. Though I wonder now how I penned a line in that state at all. I was shattered . . . shattered to pieces, I tell you, and that poem, as they term it, just expresses the breaking up of a human soul. It will be one more jest added to the rest if I ever become famous with 'Don Juan.' How very pleased Lady Byron would be," he added.

Unknown to Byron, one of his newer works, "Manfred," had already been used against him. He had written this weird supernatural story in Switzerland. The theme dealt with the history of magic and partly resembled "Faust." It also introduced the ancient legend of human sacrifice. A brother has killed his sister in order to achieve supernatural power.

Isabella had been quick to seize on this production and had

woven her own vile conception into it with deadly effect. Byron little knew that she had promulgated the idea that it was written as a confession, as she was pleased to call it, of the slander that she had spread. Fortunately he had been spared that new blow. And in spite of her treachery and endeavours still to poison his name in England, the new dramas had created an immense sensation and restored his popularity in a very marked degree.

So now he rested happy and content, drawing inspiration from the young vivacious girl who worshipped him with all the ardent passion of her race and youth. His spirit had become more strong, but he scarcely realized that his physical powers remained weak and delicate.

His only trouble now was a natural anxiety for Teresa's welfare. Count Guiccioli had stirred up much strife and tried to compel his wife to return. Pietro Gamba, who often came to see them, told Byron of the clamorous appeals to the Pope. But so far nothing had been determined on, and the girl was as happy as a bird.

She sat beside him, read aloud, or listened to him reading, and one night, as they wandered in the beautiful garden, he told her of the completion of " Marino Faliero."

" Byron, do read it," she said eagerly.

" They sat down at a small table as he laid the manuscript down. The sky was a dark sapphire and the moonlight crept in long rays through the tall olive trees that reared their stately spires in dark outlines against the high walls. The little fountain in the centre of the garden, sparkled up in delicate cascades that shone and danced in the silver light. The place was a veritable bower of roses, lilies, carnations and azaleas that lent an exotic fragrance to the evening air.

" I don't believe you will like it, my dear," said Byron, as he turned over the pages.

" I love all your work now, Byron," she answered. " Do go on and read it to me. You promised."

He complied, reading the last act of the drama in which the Doge, Marino Faliero, who has been condemned to death for his conspiracy against the State, makes his defiant speech to his judges who are assembled on the great steps of the ducal palace to see him meet his doom.

Standing beside the block, the old man launches a terrible curse against Venice :

"I speak to Time and to Eternity,
Of which I grow a portion, not to man.

. . . . . .

I am not innocent—but are these guiltless?
I perish, but not unavenged. Far ages
Float up from the abyss of time to be,
And show these eyes, before they close, the doom
Of this proud city, and I leave my curse
On her and hers for ever. . . .
. . . . . She shall be bought
And sold, and be an appanage to those
Who shall despise her. She shall stoop to be
A province for an empire, petty town
In lieu of capital, with slaves for senates,
Beggars for nobles, and panders for a people.

. . . . . .

When all the ills of conquered states shall cling thee,
Vice without splendour, sin without relief
Even from the gloss of love to smooth it o'er,
But in its stead, coarse lusts of habitude,
Prurient yet passionless, cold studied lewdness,
Depraving nature's frailty to an art—

. . . . . .

Youth without honour, age without respect.

. . . . . .

Thou den of drunkards with the blood of princes!
Gehenna of the waters, thou sea Sodom!
Thus I devote thee to the infernal gods,
Thee and thy serpent seed. . . ."

Byron broke off panting and exhausted, and leant back against his chair. Teresa looked at him in terrified amazement.

"Byron, how terrible! Oh, why do you write so of Venice? I love her. It was there we met."

She rose and went over to him, sitting on the arm of his chair, and wound her arm around him. He made no reply, but caught her hand and kissed it passionately.

"You don't understand, my child; you don't understand," he said intensely.

For the remembrance of many lurid nights in the Palace had come back to him. . . . He had grown to loathe the city that had lured him unto such degradation. There is that in Venice that has the power to draw the soul downward. Byron had felt hours of spiritual joy and inspiration in Venice earlier. There is always the magic of her beauty and the gracious work of wondrous hands who have built her with such delicate poetry. There had been moments, too, when that message,

born to him in the silent nights, had darted that uprush of feeling known only to his better self. But when he had thrown himself down in despair and courted her for the sensation of the moment, then the terrible lure of flesh had predominated. Its chains had seared him. The miracle of a pure girl's love had saved him from worse. But the awakening to his nobler self again had been attended with much agony. He had poured it out in this new work.

He could not speak of it to Teresa. Oh, to be young again ! To commence life unstained and never to have known desire or temptation ! He made no excuse for himself. He might well have done so, for Isabella's malignant enmity had shattered his life, his work and his name in England. Until then he had borne many blows. The loss of his little one Ada by trickery had completed the conquest of Byron's courage. And Venice had been the climax of his undoing.

Teresa leant her fair young head against him and tried to soothe his evident restlessness. He grew calmer after a while, but his hands were trembling as he closed the book.

" I am sorry you don't like it, but I feared as much," he said in a strained voice.

" Byron, it's wonderful. Only you could have written it."

" That is only too true," he answered sadly.

He pointed to the play.

" Put it away in the house, dearest," he said. " Not now ; I mean when we go in. I have written to Murray to tell him he must not expect any more work for a long time."

" What will you write of next ? " she asked gaily.

" I have no ideas left."

" Then, Byron, I must find you one," she said laughing.

" Teresa, what do you know of life ? I pray God you may never know more than you do now."

He looked at her tenderly. She had the supreme gift of joy and idealism, and these had drawn out all that was best in him once again.

" Sometimes, my little Teresa, I wish you had stayed in your convent," he said mournfully.

" No, no ! " she cried. " I did not wish to be a nun."

" And yet the happiest and best men I have known for many years are the monks of St. Lazzare. They are wonderful. I used to go over to the Armenian monastery often. I never realized how little the outward trappings of our existence count till I saw those simple-hearted men living their pious

lies with no thought of pleasure or gain. I think such lives have solved the great secret."

Then he smiled at his own words as a rush of emotion surged over him. A desire to live intensely and accomplish some great work before the end. Sitting alone in his study at night he had felt the silent approach of the Dread Visitor.

"When will you claim me? . . . Not yet . . . not yet!" he often said to himself. "Give me a little longer."

He found himself wondering why, now when he was so happy with Teresa, he should feel unsettled and expectant. His thoughts were travelling round in a circle. He longed to see Newstead. He thought of Augusta, his true faithful sister who had shared his sorrows and risked slander to save him and Mary. He wondered if her nobility would ever endanger her happiness in the future. One thing he had done to show the world that Isabella's pitiless campaign against Augusta was false: he had crowned his sister in song; had written some great stanzas to her in gratitude. They were there for all to see, and if any one could construe those lines against her they were beneath contempt.

He could think of Isabella and now pity her. What a fate, to be compelled to lie to the end of her life, or else confess her own share in his misfortunes. Sometimes he had a strange impulse to go back and see her once more for Ada's sake. To hold out the olive branch, and at least part friends.

Strange to relate, all thought of Mary had died away into a peaceful memory. The terrible tragedy of Hastings seemed ages away. He seemed to be looking back on his strange, troubled life as a spectator and waiting . . . always waiting for some call.

"Come, Teresa," he said, rising; "let us go in."

She picked up the manuscript and they walked up to the terrace steps and into the house.

He heard her singing gaily as she ran upstairs to his study and stood by the long open window looking into the night.

A strange thrill ran through him and his hands tingled. It was a warm, glowing sensation and pervaded his whole being. The thrill grew stronger, and he felt himself vibrating with power.

"It's glorious! . . . glorious! . . ." he said to himself, and stretched out his hands now electric with warmth. Some unseen presence was near him. He knew and felt it.

"Stay! Stay! . . . Don't leave me. . . . Stay always,"

he cried aloud, for it was such happiness to feel this new force within himself, and as he stood there he fancied he could discern a mist in the room. For one instant the sound of a far-off melody reached his ears. It vanished, and when Teresa entered and ran to him, she found him standing still, looking out up into the sky with such a look of radiant joy that for a moment she drew back, fearing to disturb some moment of poetic inspiration. The thrill died out of him—not so the power—and he looked round at her with a calm smile.

"Byron, I knew it," she whispered. "You will write again soon; something has come to you! I can see it by the joy in your eyes."

"Yes, Teresa," he answered; "something has come!"

"Tell me. . . . Tell," she urged.

Just then they heard the sound of steps coming up the garden.

"It's Pietro, Pietro," cried Teresa, and darted away to meet her brother. Byron watched her throw her arms around him and kiss him. The two seemed far away at that moment.

"Quick! Where is Byron? I have news for him," cried Pietro Gamba eagerly. He followed his sister into the room.

"Dearest, ask Fletcher to bring some lights, will you?" said Byron, and she went out to call the valet.

"And now, Pietro?" Byron held out his hand to the other, who grasped it warmly.

"Great news, Byron," cried the youth, waving a paper; "the Greeks have risen at last and gained a splendid victory."

"Quick, let me see," said Byron.

"Here," said Gamba, pushing the journal into his hand and looking over his shoulder as he read.

"Great heavens, it's true! . . . They've routed the army of Drama Ali, some thirty thousand strong—shattered them in the mountains and sent them flying. How glorious! You see what it means, Gamba?"

Byron became wildly excited as he read on. The victory of the oppressed little nation had sent a flame of enthusiasm through Europe, and funds were already being raised in France, Germany and Switzerland to help the gallant little people who had thrown off their oppressors under such fearful odds. For the Greeks were a mere handful compared to the massed hordes of the Turks.

"But why not England? . . . She must help . . . she

must," said Byron, and he did not notice that Fletcher had entered with the candles, followed by Teresa, who watched him with widely opened eyes.

"I believe she is helping; they have sent out Lord Guildford to organize," answered Pietro Gamba.

"Lord Guildford!" echoed Byron in scorn, "a charlatan and a humbug, bent on self-glorification. At his best the man's an arrant fool. Ah, what do you make of him? He professes to devote his life to Greek culture and propaganda. Goes out to those poor devils, half starving and semi-barbaric as they are now. Dresses himself up in classic robes à la Plato, sits on a huge gilded chair and recites odes to the chieftains who have to stand round pretending to enjoy it. And all the time they are waiting for money, ships, guns and ammunition to beat off the Turks. God! what a farce! . . . He's a disgrace to England!"

"Byron, dear, don't get so excited," said Teresa, coming forward. His face relaxed and he looked at her sadly.

"It's all right, dear," he said gently. Then to Gamba he added, "You know what I mean, don't you?"

And Teresa realized with a pang that Byron was not thinking of her. That, in some indefinable way, her brother had brought something that was taking him further away. That their tender tranquil hours were fading, perhaps for ever. Some perception of this must have reached Byron, for he caught her in his arms and kissed her passionately, then put her from him. Woman-like she resisted, and clung to his arm,

"Pietro," she said, with a quiver in her sweet voice, "Byron has been reading a new drama. Would you like to hear it?"

She wanted her lover to glide back to his poetry. In this new strong mood she feared him.

"Not now, dear," answered Byron. "I could not read again. Will you bring us some wine and fruit?"

The door closed and the two men were alone.

"O God, to be with them! . . . to be one of them!" said Byron, with such passion that he startled Pietro. "Would you not like to go?" he added.

"I should love it," answered the youth. "What a splendid cause!"

"To free the Greeks would be worth while indeed! Time better spent for you, my friend, than risking your young life for the wretched Venetians."

"Yes, yes, Byron. I see that now."

Byron paced the room restlessly.

"You would go, then, Gamba? If there is any chance you would go?" he asked.

"Most assuredly," answered Gamba.

"I can at least send money," said Byron. "I will write to Hobhouse and tell him to sell out some of my securities. I can help there at least."

"That's splendid of you."

"But it's so little, Pietro. They want a man to lead them: someone who can rouse them to a sense of their national power."

Byron snatched up the paper and perused it again.

"I see that Prince Mavrocordato himself has organized a very good defence at Missolonghi. That is reported to be the most important point."

"I wonder if England will help in material ways," said Gamba.

Byron dropped the paper and looked at him in surprise.

"She must! . . . in honour bound she must!" he said; then sat down and stared thoughtfully before him.

"The worst of it is that they have had so much war already, and I suppose the Government are afraid," he said to himself. "They want peace in England, and I expect they would resent new taxes or any fresh military activity."

Gamba picked up the paper and continued reading. He was inwardly amazed at the firm grip that Byron appeared to have of the whole situation. They had not discussed this matter much before. Teresa returned, followed by Fletcher again, and once more Byron made some request that sent her out of the room.

"Hullo, Byron, you're right. England is helping," said Gamba. On another page was a lengthy account of an influential party formed in London to assist the Greeks and float a large public loan for the purpose.

"Who's on the Committee?—that's the point," said Byron. Then rose in excitement. "What's that you say? Douglas Kinnaird, Hobhouse! . . . Give me the paper."

Byron read it, then his hand dropped, and the journal floated to the ground. Byron stood looking through the window, and a long silence ensued.

"Why, Gamba, I had forgotten you," he said at length.

"Do have some wine. By the way, there's no need for you to go, is there? Stay here to-night."

"If you wish it. But, Byron, while we are alone, a word about Teresa. The case is decided."

"They will never dare to force her back to her husband. She hates him! The marriage was iniquitous," said Byron.

"No. But it is settled, and she will have to return to her father's house and stay there. I may add there will be no bar to your seeing her there, of course."

"How will your father treat her," asked Byron sternly.

"Have no fear. He realizes the marriage was an error."

"Say rather a crime."

"Byron, have patience. The Count Guiccioli is very old, and when he dies, you and Teresa can marry."

Byron looked at him strangely.

"Pietro, if anything should happen to me before then—No, do let me finish. . . . We must provide for possibilities. If I should die before then, promise me you will love and guard your sister always. She may meet a man more suited to her years who will make her young life happy. She is but a child. Give me your promise now."

"Since you desire it so, I promise," said Gamba, taking his hand, "but again I say, Byron . . ."

"Hush! Here she is," answered Byron.

It was long past midnight when Gamba retired, He and Byron sat talking over the news.

"Mind, be in readiness," were the latter's words as they parted for the night, and again Byron went to the window and stretched out his hands, but there was no thrill now. He stood looking up at the stars.

"The Call," he said to himself at last. "The Call! O God, I thank Thee it has not come too late. . . . I hear it now!"

A slight movement beside him made him start. Teresa had stolen in and stood beside him in her simple white dress, with her curls falling over her shoulders.

"Are you still thinking of your new poem?" she asked him. "I know it will be wonderful. Byron, tell me what you are going to do."

"Not yet, dear, not yet," he replied gently.

"But you know what it is now."

He put his arms around her and held her very close. She gave a little shiver.

"Byron, dearest, it is cold here; won't you come and rest?"

"Yes, dear, I shall sleep well to-night," he answered, taking his last look at the quiet sky. The stars seemed to be speaking to him.

* * * * * *

A week later the summons came from London. Would Lord Byron accept a commission in the Greek Army and lend his name and service to the cause? He replied:

"The freedom of Greece is ever in my heart. I go most willingly."

The long pilgrimage was nearing its end at last.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

For the first time in all his fevered life Byron felt he had discovered his destiny. Self-realization came to him in a mighty wave, sweeping away all other impressions. One mighty passion, greater and stronger than all the rest, had lain in his heart from boyhood. It had soared out into his work, and in such hours he had reached his highest and truest self. The deep love of Greece! A worship of her mighty literature and a feeling of one with her that was beyond all explanation. At least any he could have given himself.

There was one, however, for Byron was Greek himself, in face, in thought and feeling. His destiny had steadily worked on until this hour, bringing him tragedy on tragedy. Yet in moments of his deepest degradation he had risen up to sing of her splendours for a brief space.

And now the call had come! It was surely fitting that a poet should offer up his life to free her. For Greece had given of her splendour and glory to the world. And Byron knew in his own heart that this was to be the end of the long weary journey. His failing strength, his own mirror, which reflected a man looking many years older than his own age, his sense of having spent his genius and partially wasted his life, and, above all, his longing for rest, all whispered that the messenger of death was not so far away.

Yet, to do one great thing before the end, to rouse others to carry on the work of freeing this long oppressed land, stirred mighty thoughts in his tired brain, and lifted him up beyond himself until he forgot fatigue, sorrow, blighted hopes, in this one aim.

Gamba was amazed, and inspired by the calm self-possession with which Byron went into all details of the campaign. And when, added to this, he showed the deepest tenderness and forethought for Teresa's future, softening down the parting and gently helping her to control her own grief at the parting, he felt a brother's love for this strange man who had so unexpectedly become a part of his own bright young life. The feeling was returned in full.

If any doubt now existed in the minds of others, of the power of Byron's name in England, despite his past troubles, they were dispelled by the thrill of excitement and delight with which the news was received that he was going out to Greece to represent his country in this great event. The papers vied with each other now in laudatory paragraphs, and all attempts on the part of the Milbanke family to stay the turn of the tide were utterly useless.

Isabella soon realized that her sun was setting now, and the story of her wrongs recoiling on herself. She devoted her time therefore in persecuting Augusta, and endeavouring to trap her into some admission that should prove the "slander" correct. For the time, even that trickery was stayed. And the name of Lord Byron met her in every paper, was on every lip. She retired to wait a more favourable opportunity.

John Cam Hobhouse, beside himself with joy at the prospect of Byron's return to fame and, possibly, home again, wrote :

"Every man here is stirred with the greatest enthusiasm for your noble determination. May the Gods give you glory and yet more glory, and bring you home in triumph to us all."

Indifferent alike to public praise or private treachery, Byron pursued his way. Letters from Greece poured in from every quarter. The only problem for him to decide was, which of the three strong parties would most benefit by his personal administration.

The greatest danger the Greeks had to fear was their lack of leadership. This was a more formidable barrier to their success than the Turks.

One faction in Eastern Greece was under the control of the chieftain Odysseus. These had republican leanings. Another was commanded at present by Prince Mavrocordato, whose government extended over Western Greece, and there were besides the masses of untutored mountaineers and natives who seemed to be acting on their own.

"Gamba, my friend, the Turks seem to be making their new objective Missolonghi. That must be our destination," said Byron, as they sat together in his study. The house was desolate now that Teresa had returned home, and he longed to be starting.

"Trelawney writes advising us to join Odysseus," said Gamba.

"No doubt ! But Missolonghi is in need of everything. It is the principal post of danger," replied Byron.

"The point of most danger . . ." said the youth slowly. Byron turned on him with flashing eyes.

"Do you hesitate?" he said, quickly. Gamba rose, and went to him with outstretched hand.

"For myself, no, Byron! Forgive me if I remind you that my sister trusts me to send her good news of you. You are not very strong—physically, I mean. Is this choice wise?"

"Fate must decide that, not I," was the quiet reply.

"Still, Trelawney must know something, and he is most eager for us to join Odysseus."

Pietro Gamba spoke of a man whom Byron had come to know in Pisa—a bluff sailor with a passion for reckless adventure. He had joined the Greek cause some months ago, and written expatiating on the chances of winning success and military glory.

"My friend, let us leave Trelawney to do as he pleases. I feel that our aims are a little more in unison with the great cause," remarked Byron after a silence.

"He's a good fighter," Gamba reminded him.

"Have I ever disputed that?" answered the other. Byron rose, and went to the window looking out on the garden. Then he spoke in a low voice, as if communing to himself.

"We are going out to help a country with immortal memories; what we do not must last till the end of time!"

"And you truly think, Byron, we shall find all we seek if we go to Missolonghi?" asked Gamba.

"Yes! We shall find that, at least!" Byron's deep voice reverberated on the air.

For a few moments he appeared to become moody. Then he turned to Gamba.

"Do you prefer to join the others?" he asked.

"No! No! Byron. Where you lead, I follow," cried Gamba.

Thus the pact was sealed.

There was one person who could not be consoled at the new project. That was poor Fletcher.

"I truly think his Lordship must be mad," he said to Tita, the gondolier. "To leave Ravenna where he has been really happy and well of late, and go out to a parcel of savages! He must have taken leave of his senses."

And Tita, a giant with the gentleness of a woman, asked in deep, level voice:

"And what do you do, Mr. Fletcher?"

The question left Fletcher speechless with anger.

"Do you go with him?" continued Tita.

Fletcher turned on him in anger.

"How long have I spoken of leaving Lord Byron?"

The man smiled, and showed his large white teeth.

"The English Lord, he want you always," he said, trying to soothe Fletcher's wounded feelings. "When we come back from Greece I go to Venice, but you go with him to his own country."

"Yes! . . . Yes, of course!" said Fletcher hastily. His anger had changed to a secret fear, and he offered up a prayer that it might be very soon. He tried to shake off his heaviness of heart, and tried to comfort himself. One thing he was thankful for, at least. The terrible nights in the Mocenigo Palace were over for good.

"Nothing can ever be like that again; he won't go back to those ways again," he told himself.

Soon after this, Byron and his little party embarked on board the *Hercules*. Greatly to their surprise, Trelawney elected to join them. Byron's wealth and name attracted this adventurer, and he saw the chance of reflected glory.

The voyage was difficult, but at last they sighted their destination. Gamba was beside himself with joy.

"Byron, you have reached the Mecca of your dreams!" he cried.

And then his fervour died. They landed at Missolonghi.

If Byron realized the forlornness of his hopes he gave no sign. The others looked at each other in silent horror and dismay. The place was surrounded with a pestilent lagoon. It was a depressing sight enough, with its mud banks and walls to which clung garbage and seaweed.

They made their way through narrow lanes, and passed broken-down booths that served for shops. Walked through gutters flooded with recent heavy rains, and at last reached the "house" set apart for "Lord Byron and his suite." It was dignified by the name of "headquarters." A tenement of three storeys—damp, bare, furnished with the poorest necessities, and standing in a large bare yard, that was filled with a motley crew, who formed into lines to cheer them as they entered.

The place was hopelessly insanitary, squalid, and utterly inadequate, even for such a strong healthy man as Trelawney. To Byron it was little better than a death trap.

To the wonder of Fletcher, the one-time Dandy of St. James' Street, whose exotic fancies had so often annoyed Hobhouse, now emerged as a brave, cheerful soldier, thoughtful for all besides himself, and utterly indifferent to his own health and comfort.

"Good God! This place will kill his Lordship! He oughtn't to stay here another hour," said the tearful valet to Tita, who nodded, with his eyes full of tears. They did all they could to make Byron's room comfortable. Their master had chosen thesm allest, and allotted the other to the rest of the party, Gamba, Trelawney and a young man of the name of Parry.

Meanwhile, Byron was busy holding his council below. Colonel Stanhope represented the English army and commanded the Suliote's as well. These men were a rough type of bandits, lawless, and very difficult to manage, but of great value, in Byron's opinion, because of their knowledge of the country. Prince Mavrocordato had sent his representative.

After much discussion it was decided to combine for a great attack on the Turks in the spring. This was to take place at Lepanto, a name already famous in Venetian history, when the hardy Venetians of the sixteenth century had defeated the Turks in one of the most magnificent battles in naval history. Byron thought that if the Turks could be defeated by an armament of a hundred ships and a comparatively small army, it should be possible now to repeat the story, and drive them before the allies' combined forces. The very name Lepanto was calculated to inspire fear in the enemy.

One thing was essential to their success—ammunition. The choice of Parry as one of the party had been decided on for the reason that he was the commanding officer of the artillery and also an engineer. He had been recommended to Byron as understanding every kind of ammunition. One projectile, known as the "Congreve Rocket," was to be manufactured for this attack. It would enable the Greeks and English to reduce the Turkish fortresses to dust and ashes at a long distance range.

Byron worked out a splendid plan of attack, but he based all his calculations on the aid of these famous "Congreve Rockets." Parry was enthusiastic, and promised large supplies by the spring.

"Are you absolutely certain you can bring them?" asked Byron. "For the love of heaven, Parry, realize that you

must not fail us here at any cost. Tell us now, and if it is impossible we must make other plans."

"Lord Byron, there is no need to do so. I can bring you more than you can want or use in the next six months. You may rely on me absolutely. You will have an easy task if you can organize here and carry on till I return."

With this positive assurance Parry took his leave of them all, and Byron then commenced to investigate the state of affairs that existed in the city.

He found the wretched people living in a state of terror, and went about putting fresh heart into them. He arranged supplies, drilled the soldiers, strove night and day to reduce chaos to order, and succeeded in restoring some order and discipline.

To impress the natives with confidence he very wisely arranged ceremonial rides when the weather permitted.

He made a curiously detached figure from the stalwart guards as he rode along in his brilliant Greek uniform. The red and white tunic, the scarlet trappings of his horse, and the helmet with its black plumes awed and delighted the onlookers. They did not notice the frail figure and worn tired face from which his eyes shone out like stars as he passed on. Byron seemed less like a man than a spirit. There was something unearthly in him now to Gamba's impression. He was growing physically weaker each hour.

But the born leader and soldier now shone out with splendid power. Not one detail was neglected. The starving people were provided for and protected. The rough wild Suliote's formed into companies and drilled each day. Despatches sent to other forces, and one of Byron's greatest innovations was to enforce the humane treatment of the Turkish women and children who fell into the hands of the infuriated Greeks. He also discovered that one of the most pressing needs of the moment was complete harmony between all the leaders of his own party.

Colonel Stanhope annoyed him intensely by his impracticable notions. This gentleman's one notion of the best way of preparing the soldiers for the coming attack was to "educate the ignorant masses." To this end he had set up a printing press, and spent valuable time in printing pamphlets to inform the Greeks of the glorious nature of their enterprise.

"Free them first from fear and tyranny, save them from being exterminated by the Turks, and then on with your

books," said Byron. "Man alive, don't you see the whole place is disorganized, and these natives, half of them don't obey orders? What are we to do with them in the battle if we don't drill them now?"

Edward Trelawney skulked about—looking very sullen and giving little help. He was inwardly fuming at having quitted the other party. It mattered nothing to him that Missolonghi was the key to the war. He told himself he had not come to rough it on bad food, and serve under "his Lordship." For his envy of Byron grew by leaps and bounds. He wanted to be the master, not the subordinate. Byron's money and name would have been useful enough. Trelawney, the braggart, wanted to bend them to his own ends.

Pietro Gamba retained his hero-worship for Byron. But all hope of victory was fast fading. His hopes flagged.

"Parry's a fine fellow," said Byron to him, when he faltered out his fears one day. "When he comes back with those rockets, we have nothing to fear my friend! Meanwhile, Pietro, let us train these fellows, and keep them from flying at one another's throats. That's all there is to be done for the moment."

Every man, woman and child in the place seemed to think it should rain gold for them, now that Lord Byron was at the head of affairs. The drain on his purse became impossible. Still he bore up against all odds with consummate bravery. Not one word of impatience or despondency would he permit himself, and he rallied all those around him.

"If old Hobhouse could see us now," he said one day in jest. "He used to chaff me for having my rooms so full of flowers; we could do with some now to sweeten the air a little."

"Say rather food and wine and more warmth," grumbled Trelawney. Byron looked at him with a faint smile.

"Did you come here to rough it on 'beefsteak and port'?" he asked with sarcasm. The other made no reply, but stalked away.

But even Byron's courage began to fail him when the fear of mutiny loomed near. In his own room he would lie awake and think until his brain ached, and he grew sick with the effort.

"Why did you choose those damned Suliote's?" cried Stanhope one day. "Lord Byron, they will ruin everything."

Byron sighed.

"They are the only men who have the endurance for mountain warfare! You know that, Colonel. Except for your

small body of English engineers, we have a mass of half-starved, wholly untrained creatures who, ten to one, will fly at the sound of the first gun. The best part of the army is with Odysseus. These Suliote's will follow me anywhere."

"You, perhaps, but no one else," answered Stanhope.

Byron stamped his foot with impatience.

"Man! Man!" he cried; "is this a time to quarrel? What are we waiting for? The spring and Parry to return! With his ammunition we can make the Turks fly quick enough. The Lepanto attack is our one objective! Let us forget all differences in that."

He broke into a smile, and offered his hand impulsively to the other, who took it, and looked him steadily in the face.

"Lord Byron, are you so sure of our victory?" he asked after a pause.

"What a question from one soldier to another," returned Byron. "If we have that certainty, our victory would be robbed of its glory."

Stanhope turned away abashed. He, the military expert and trained leader, was losing confidence. And this poetic and highly-wrought Lord Byron, noted for his erratic nature, soared far beyond him in cool confidence and patience. He turned at the door, and glanced back at the other's colourless face and hollow sleepless eyes.

"Lord Byron," he said very gently, "your life is very precious to us all. Is it wise for you to risk it in this place much longer?"

Byron's reply was short and to the point.

"I stay, until the time for the attack. Then you and I will lead our followers into the attack on the Lepanto."

He limped slowly towards his own room, nodded to the Colonel, and passed in.

How many battles with despair Byron fought out in his own room, none knew.

But from that day, as if to test his endurance to the last, the rain set in, pitiless, persistent, drenching day and night. It was the worst blow of all. No chance of exercise. No possibility of drilling the men! Nothing to do but wait, in that damp, dark wretched house, listening to the sound of rain.

How far off it seemed to the spring! Byron became exhausted, and took to lying on his bed trying to conserve his strength for the one great ordeal.

The rain had ceased for a few hours, when the party were startled by the sound of firing.

"Good God! What is it?" cried Gamba.

Then steps were heard, and the door was suddenly flung open. A herd of wild, infuriated Suliote's rushed into the room, yelling for more pay. They were armed, and threatened Stanhope, Gamba and Trelawney.

"More pay from the English Lord, or we fight not!" they cried. The three drew their revolvers, but in another moment it would have gone hard with them, for the ringleader of the rebels gave the signal, and a score or more of swords were drawn.

The door of Byron's room opened, and he appeared. He was ashen to the lips, and trembling in every limb, but he steadied himself against the post, and then suddenly limped forward right into the midst of the mutineers.

"Back to your posts!" he cried. "Not another sou shall you have until you all return."

They drew back with one accord. Byron had covered them with his revolver, but they could have despatched him in an instant had they wished to do so. His appearance so startled them that they fell back from him and retreated.

"Go!" cried Byron again. "Back to your posts, I say!" His voice completed the spell. They could not see that he was so weak he could scarcely stand upright; they only saw those blazing eyes, and heard the words of command. They felt the power of his courage, and their wild natures respected it.

Then they turned and fled out of the room, down the stairs, into the courtyard, shouting, cursing and fighting each other.

Byron swayed, and would have fallen if Stanhope and Gamba had not caught him.

"I'm all right," he said faintly. "One to you, Stanhope; these fellows want to fail us."

Stanhope looked at him with great concern. He felt no desire to score a triumph over this dauntless soul. In his own heart he had lost faith in Byron's judgment, even in the cause they had at heart. But there was something here beyond that issue. The revelation of an unconquerable nobility and force in one whom he had secretly underrated and misjudged.

"Lord Byron," he urged, "Will you not consent to get away from this place while the rain holds off? You are ill.

This place is sapping your strength. Think of your own life!"

"Man! Man! A little longer! I must hold out till the spring, Stanhope. Trust me! Help me! . . . Our hour of victory is near," whispered Byron.

"What's that? . . . More mutiny?" cried Gamba, rushing to the door and flinging it open. For wild cries now reached their ears and the sound of firing.

Byron straightened himself and gripped the table.

"Cheering, hark at it!" cried Stanhope. "What does it mean?"

Byron threw up his arms with an hysterical cry of joy.

"It's Parry . . . Parry come back! Oh, thank God! . . . Thank God! . . . Now we can get away at last. We had to wait for him to return here. Oh, thank God! The Congreve Rockets at last! They can mutiny to their heart's content. We can do without the Suliote's."

He was beside himself with joy.

"Go down, Gamba," he panted . . . "Go down and meet him. . . Bring him here. . ."

The cheering now merged into a mighty roar of voices and the sound of a military band reached their ears.

"Good man!" exclaimed Byron. "He's chosen to come like this . . . put fresh heart into them all! . . ." He moved to go to the door, but reeled back. "Quick Stanhope, you go too. By Jove! we must ride out to-morrow again. . . . See, the rain has cleared for good. . . . It was worth waiting for. Opon the door wide. . . . They're in the courtyard."

Steps were now ascending the stairs. Then a tall, stalwart form darkened the door.

"Parry at last! . . . Oh, thank God to see you!" said Byron.

The other saluted and stood to attention.

"You've brought your supplies. The rockets must be unpacked at once and brought up here to be kept dry. Gentlemen, we shall be leaving Missolonghi soon now, and in a few months I hope we shall have shattered the Turkish Fleet, and then for Western Greece."

Parry's voice broke in, bluff and discordant.

"Sorry, Lord Byron. No Congreve Rockets possible."

"What on earth do you mean?"

Parry shrugged his shoulders.

"There were no materials available. I could hardly get the ordinary supplies."

" Good God, Parry ! Have you failed us ? " cried Byron, in despair.

" I tell you they could not be made." Parry was sullen.

" The attack on the Lepanto : we counted on you. Parry, you gave your word—what of the attack ? "

" We must try some other way," answered Parry gruffly, as he faced Byron's searching gaze.

A long silence followed. Gamba looked at Stanhope. Trelawney shrugged his shoulders scornfully.

Then Byron turned away and tottered back towards his own room. Gamba followed him and saw the tears streaming down his cheeks.

" I'll never forgive you, Parry, for failing Lord Byron," he said hotly. Byron raised his hand.

" This is Fate ! Blame no one, Pietro. It's all right. I suppose Parry did his best. . . I'll lie down a while. Rather spent, that's all ! "

The door closed behind him. Outside the courtyard was fast emptying itself of the rabble that had accompanied Parry on his arrival from the shore.

Byron was lying on his bed staring into the gloom, and all through the night he never closed his weary eyes. Then, towards morning, he heard the sound of rain pattering down on the roof. It grew heavier . . . it was falling in heavy sheets now, splashing against the window. He remembered hearing rain long ago . . . when he had fallen asleep in another room and dreamed that Mary was dead and he could hear the gravel falling on her coffin. It sounded like that now. Someone was going to die soon . . . Himself ! He hoped so. Everything was a failure ! . . . Life . . . happiness . . . even his hopes of conquest and achievement for Greece ! He sank back on his bed exhausted and closed his eyes. Would the rain never cease ? It beat down now with redoubled force. He was thankful when the darkness closed in and he fell asleep to forget his misery.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

What inexorable fate was it that shut Byron in his prison house?

Trelawney made good his escape and joined Odysseus. Stanhope, at Byron's own request, now left for Athens, and all arrangements were made for the others to follow him. The day was nearing for the welcome departure from Missolonghi and then the pitiless rain set in once more.

Thunderstorms of exceptional violence followed and once a shock of earthquake. The whole place was now a swamp. Exit was impossible.

Byron, deprived of all hope, fell into a low fever, and very soon Gamba was consulting Parry and Fletcher as to the best way of keeping up his strength until such times as the weather changed and they could get away.

"Parry, what is going to happen?" he asked one day as they stood looking down on the courtyard, now under water.

"Nothing, so far as I can see," answered Parry. He and Gamba conversed in low tones so as not to disturb Byron in the next room.

"Byron seems very ill," said the latter.

"I don't like to say what I do think about him," answered Parry. Gamba strode to Byron's door and knocked gently.

"Come in; I'm not asleep," called out Byron. The other entered.

"Why upon earth are you in the dark?" he asked. "Shall I get Fletcher to bring you a light?"

"I haven't wanted one," answered Byron; "I have been trying to get used to the dark. . . . It's as well. Not for you, Pietro," he added. "I hope not for you for many years."

"What on earth are you talking of, Byron?" Gamba sat down beside him.

"Nothing. Tell Fletcher to bring the lights. Oh, great Jupiter! Listen to that damned rain!"

He rolled over and covered his eyes with his arm. There

was a sound of weeping, but Gamba took no notice. He waited.

"Parry wants you to get away," he said at last.

Byron gave an odd little laugh.

"Does he? . . . Perhaps he will tell us how."

His light manner sat strangely upon him. His face was terribly thin now. His soft grey curls long and straggling and his hands almost transparent. They played with the collar of his cloak, which he had flung over himself for warmth. All his nervous energy had died out of him. He was, or intimated he was, waiting for something—what it was he would not say.

"I think I'll get up for a while. . . Help me, will you?"

He struggled to his feet, swaying against Gamba.

"Come on. . . Let's have a drink and forget our troubles," he said. "Cider is all we have. Open a bottle, Parry."

"You ought to lie down, Byron."

"A pretty soldier I shall make if I give in," answered Byron.

"I wonder how long it will be before we hear any news from England about the Committee," said Gamba, as Parry opened a bottle of cider and poured some out.

Just then a violent gust of rain dashed against the window.

Byron started violently.

"What did you say?" he muttered. Then drank off the cider and stared into the corner of the room.

The others looked at him.

"England," he whispered to himself.

At that moment the damp cold room faded, and a picture of his beloved Newstead Abbey rose up before him. Then a sudden pang of agony shot through his brain and the glass dropped from his hand.

"Gamba! . . . My head! . . . I feel . . ." His voice trailed off and he fell forward into Pietro's arms as the other rushed to his side.

"Quick! . . . Tita! . . . Fletcher! . . ."

Gamba sent Tita for the only doctor they had, Dr. Bruno, a young inexperienced man who was overcome with his responsibilities and could scarcely give any help or advice.

Byron soon recovered from his faintness and insisted on still getting up. The rain abated again, and in spite of Fletcher's entreaties, Byron insisted on going with Gamba for a ride.

They went and were overtaken by a violent thunderstorm. There was no alternative but to return by boat. Byron sat

in the stern shivering violently. All at once he pointed to the horizon.

"Gamba! . . . Look! . . ." His voice was hoarse and strange. "Shall we go and join Stanhope? Wouldn't it be splendid?"

Gamba looked at him in amazement. He had never seen death written so plainly in any face before.

"To sail beyond there . . . to reach them . . . and fight."

"Quick, get us in," said Gamba to the boatman.

Byron strained his gaze towards the sky and sea, where they joined in one grey line.

"Away! . . . we'll get away," he muttered. "Set sail and go . . . now . . . Pietro . . . Now! . . ."

He glanced back towards the shore with a look of horror. He seemed to dread returning to that swamp-ridden house.

"On! Get us back before the rain comes on worse. . . . He's very ill," said Gamba again to the man.

They landed soon afterwards.

"We've had our ride . . . anyway." Byron smiled faintly and then collapsed. They picked him up and carried him within doors.

Then the last fight commenced. Hurricanes of wind and rain now descended on Missolonghi. Tumult within and without.

Byron, lying on his bed, had a confused notion of figures moving around him . . . people in tears . . . others talking in whispers. The fever increased.

"Gamba . . . don't let Bruno bleed me. . . . Let me get up. . . ."

He glanced round the miserable room. The rain was falling in torrents above his head; the wind moaning round the place. To die like that. To have failed so utterly. Oh God! to have fallen in some great charge from the blue sky . . . to have heard the shouts of victory!

He slept a while and awoke to find Fletcher beside him.

"Forward! . . . Forward!" he panted wildly, trying to rise.

Someone was bandaging his head. It hurt. He begged for relief. Then he felt the coverlet raised. Fletcher was placing some poultice to his feet. He cried aloud.

"My knees. . . do not uncover . . . Fletcher. . . ."

And Fletcher understood. He tenderly covered the poor

lame foot and applied the remedy to the knees. No one but he had ever seen Byron's feet. There were others in the room. The great blue eyes met his in an agonized appeal.

"Parry," he whispered. Parry came to his side. "I want you to go back to England. . . . Go on building your schooner. . . . Get away. . . . One thing . . . Remember . . . I swear before God that what my wife said about . . . my sister . . . Augusta . . . was a lie . . . an odious, wicked lie. . . ."

His mind was wandering after this. He recited verses . . . cried out as if in battle and railed on those who tried to hold him down when he tried to rise.

At last he awoke to consciousness to see Fletcher's familiar face bending over him.

"Fletcher," he panted . . . "I shall provide for you and Tita."

"My Lord! My Lord! Don't think of that. What can I do to help you?"

"Get paper and pencil. Quick! Go to Lady Byron . . . to my little Ada . . . and go also to my sister . . . Augusta . . . you are friends with her . . . I . . ." Byron broke off and lay muttering to himself.

"You have heard . . . everything . . ." he gasped.

"Oh, my Lord . . . not a word!" cried Fletcher.

"Too late! . . . Too late! . . ."

The room was growing faint. Then gentle hands loosened the bandage that seemed like a vice round his tortured head. He shed tears and smiled.

"Now I can go to sleep," murmured Byron, as the room died away from his vision. Until now everything had been painful. The burning ache of fever . . . the horrible contraction in his head . . . the agony in his breast. It was very dark, and continued so for quite a long, long time.

* * * * * *

At last he opened his eyes. He was aware of a sweet cool wind that was sweet with the perfume of many flowers. Gradually Byron gathered consciousness of his whereabouts.

He was lying on a slope of grass, very green and fresh, and evidently on a hill, for the sky above was vast and of a serene blue, cloudless and beautiful; and the sun was shining with soft rays upon the fair place. There were lilies and anemones growing everywhere.

Far beyond, a stately mountain reared up, magnificent and

solemn. He had seen it somewhere, but could not recollect now.

A soft breeze blew, and there was no sound until a flutter of a garment beside him drew his attention.

Then before him stood a woman of surpassing loveliness, with imperial glory in her eyes and a tender smile upon her lips. She was robed in shining white and wore a helmet on her head.

"Athene!" cried Byron. "Gracious goddess of wisdom and light." He tried to rise, but was too weak.

"Welcome, singer of great songs and our beloved son!" she said in a voice that vibrated like music in his ears.

"I know you well!" he cried again.

"Yes, you know us well! You know us all! Here upon Mount Olympus we know, love and honour you!"

"I have done nothing," cried Byron, and the tears streamed down his cheeks. "I have failed, betrayed your high trust. Oh, goddess, I am not worthy of a single thought from you!"

"We love you always," said Athene.

"For what?"

"For your glorious songs of ancient Greece; for your love of us and our past glories, too often forgotten in the heart of man."

"I have done nothing," he cried again. "Goddess, I have failed in life."

"Have we not watched your earthly course?" she answered him mournfully; "have we not seen your travail of soul, your mockery, your mad despair? We were all loving, yet so powerless to help. Yet you are here now and still our champion in a world of shams, of earthliness and woe!"

"Of woe to me, indeed!" Byron answered her, and bowed his head and wept.

Presently a sweet melody filled the air, and words familiar to him floated to his ears.

> "For all in vain
> The pulse of the heart and the plot of the brain
> That striveth beyond the laws that live."

Athene's hand softly touched him and he raised his head.

"You, too, have striven beyond the laws that live," she said, with infinite tenderness.

"Who sang those words?" he asked her. Her eyes filled with tears.

" They are the voices of all the poets who, like yourself, have striven high and failed. Now they look down on mortals with sad longing."

" No other one has failed as I have done : mine was the ruin of soul ! " cried Byron despairingly.

For now he was torn with a fierce agony. Haunted again, as he had been in Ravenna, with the bitter remembrance of his life in Venice ! He hid his face from that clear, gentle gaze. How could he face Athene with the ribaldries and grossness of " Don Juan " ? She who came down from high Olympus knew of that worldly strain of his and all the wreckage of his inmost being. The lust, the reckless shame, the wearing out of that great brain of his that had been tuned to immortal melodies.

" Ah, goddess ! why did you all forsake me ? " he said.

Athene answered him.

" Forsake you ! Nay, we have been ever near you. But you would not listen to our messages. Yet we loved you still, for in your songs of Greece we lived anew. Long, long have we been forgotten save for such as you. We live again in our poets' yearnings. We never have forsaken you. We watched and prayed and wept. And so it came to pass that the pure light still hovered near you, even in the darkest hour. Then, when the harp fell from your nerveless hands, we passed into the gloom."

Byron strove to speak but could not. His sobs were choking him.

" You called us back to you, even in the midst of your mockery, for was it not in Venice that you sang " The Isles of Greece " ? continued Athene lovingly ; " and have you not died for her ? "

" Then, am I dead ? . . ."

" Not yet . . . but soon. Mortals may deem you so ; yet know there is no such thing as death, either here or yonder. Now you are in the spaces between the living and the dead. Your soul must travel to other regions when you leave your body, never to return in the same form. We waited here to welcome you before that journey onwards to the shores of time and of eternity."

She put her hands to his brow, and all the bitter memories of his Venetian life faded away. He became quite tranquil.

Three shadowy forms drew near.

" Who are these ? " he asked. Then looked again at them.

" I know them all," he whispered.

The first was Mary Chaworth, and the sight of her made his heart beat with old longings. The second was Isabella, and the third—ah ! how short a time since they had parted—little Teresa, with her fair curls floating in the breeze.

They did not come very close, for Athene stayed them.

" Why do they bear the faces of those three ? " asked Byron.

" They were your Fates," the goddess made reply.

" Then why was Mary taken from me ? " cried Byron passionately. " She was my one true star, my only real love."

Athene shook her head.

" Nay, she was never meant for you. We warned you often, but you would not hear. A kinsman's blood severed you both for all time. Yet did you fondly cling to her and she to you. Thus both were stricken down in misery."

A mist gathered round Mary and she vanished. Byron looked at the figure of Isabella—stern, hard and cold.

" And what of her ? " he asked.

Athene's voice was stern as she replied :

" From thy first error came the second. This choice was even more dire than the first. This woman is THE MORAL CLYTEMNESTRA OF YOUR FATE ! Most truly did you so record her. Her heart is evil. This is her sorry fame, yet she has chosen it ; it will be hers until the end of time."

Byron looked again, and only the little Teresa now remained. Athene smiled on her.

" We sent her to you and she has played her part," she said. " Her childish hands restrung thy harp once more. It sang new songs of splendour that will echo in the hearts of men. Be comforted ! "

He rose now and followed her. Very weary, yet with a great peace in his soul. Athene led him on. They seemed to float up the mountain. The grass was aflame here with lilies and anemones.

Then he saw myriads of white-robed figures all waiting, all watching him. He gave a great cry. He knew them all. A forest of dim shadowy arms and faces, radiant with immortal lights.

Eyes looked into his that had lived and wept and agonized ; other eyes that had smiled in anguish and gone down to the tomb unconquered—had flung away sweet youth, love, and earthly glory as worthless things, to live upon the heights ! Eternal watchers of the spheres

Byron sank down on his knees in reverence and cried once more, " I am not worthy ! Let me go back to the earth and live and strive again."

His words died away, and strains of melody filled the air. Rose leaves were falling on him. He knelt there in wonder and adoration.

All the spirits of the ancient heroes, poets and warriors, even the gods and goddesses of fair Olympus stood there to welcome him. One radiant form advanced holding a wreath of gold.

" No, no, not for me ! I have done nothing ! I have failed ! "

But the crown was placed on his head, and a great shout of joy went up from the mighty throng. He heard more singing and saw those shining forms slowly fading as the twilight deepened. He was drifting down, down again. Soon it would be night.

Then—ah ! wonderful and sweetest of all to him !—the sister who had loved him so floated towards him. Augusta's face looked into his own, and her arms enfolded him. It was his last remembrance of the immortal mountains and the first he recalled in his next moment.

" His Lordship has been unconscious for twenty-four hours," said Dr. Bruno softly. " The end is very near."

Byron opened his eyes for one instant. Fletcher's face looked into his own. He smiled content. It was well. He was back in his room at Newstead. It had all been a dream—a wonderful dream ! Then he closed his eyes again and fell asleep ! FOR EVER.

" O God, his Lordship's gone ! " sobbed Fletcher, falling on his knees in the cold dark room, while the rain still beat against the window and lightning flashed through the gloom. Far off they heard the distant crash of thunder.

The doctor felt his pulse.

" Yes, Fletcher, he must have passed away just after he opened his eyes. You are right. Lord Byron is dead ! "

EPILOGUE

SUNRISE and sorrow in Missolonghi, and the shores were crowded with a weeping throng. The Easter bells were ringing out their message of hope and gladness to hearts now bowed down with sadness and despair.

Slowly a ship was gliding down the waters. The guns were firing thirty-seven times for the thirty-seven years of the dead hero.

There, clear in the dawn, lay a coffin covered with a simple pall. On it a helmet, a sword, and one large wreath of laurel.

The rain had ceased now, and the magic splendour of the sky lent a mirage of beauty to the shore, and the sun, gracious at last, shone down on the gorgeous robes of the priests blessing the barque that bore away the great English Chieftain who had died to save their land.

But of the glory of the scene there was no thought in one sad heart—one homely figure standing close beside the body of his master whom he had served so faithfully and well.

For Fletcher's eyes saw only the sunlight on an English garden as it gilded the grey stone of a dead dog's tomb. And Fletcher's ears heard the sound of a rushing waterfall. They also heard an old man's quivering voice speaking to him once again :

"He'll never know no peace until he comes back home for good."

THE END